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Everybody's

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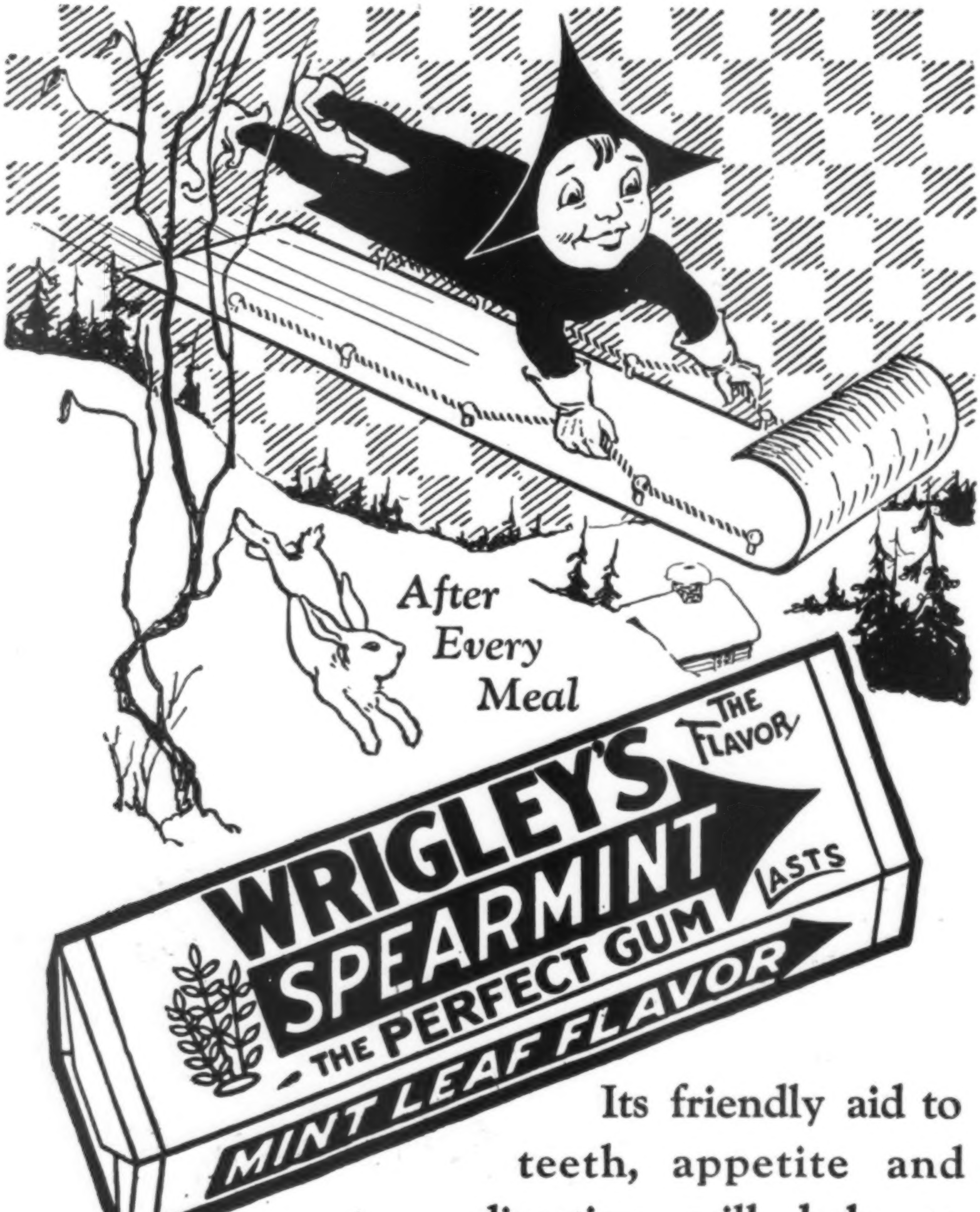
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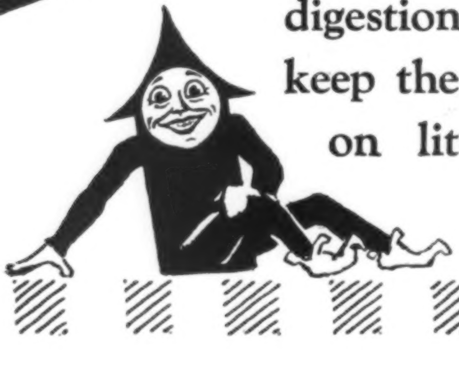

February, 1928
Vol. LVIII No. 2

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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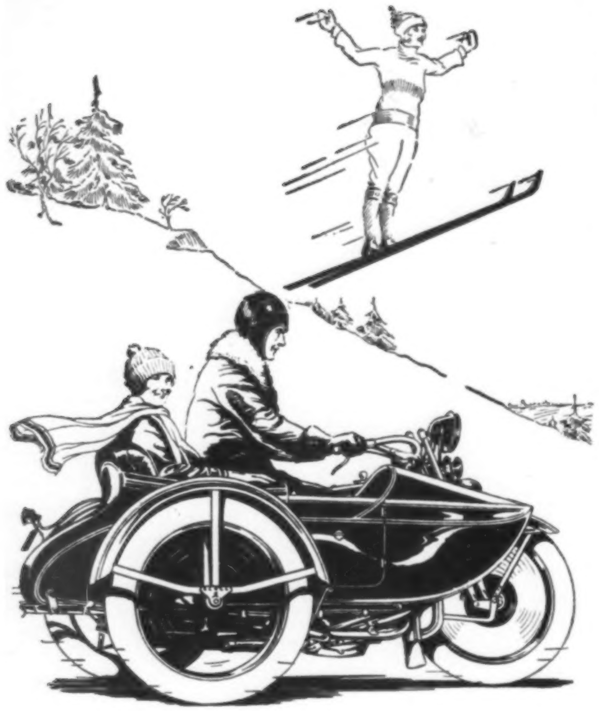

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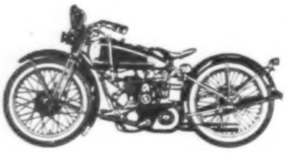

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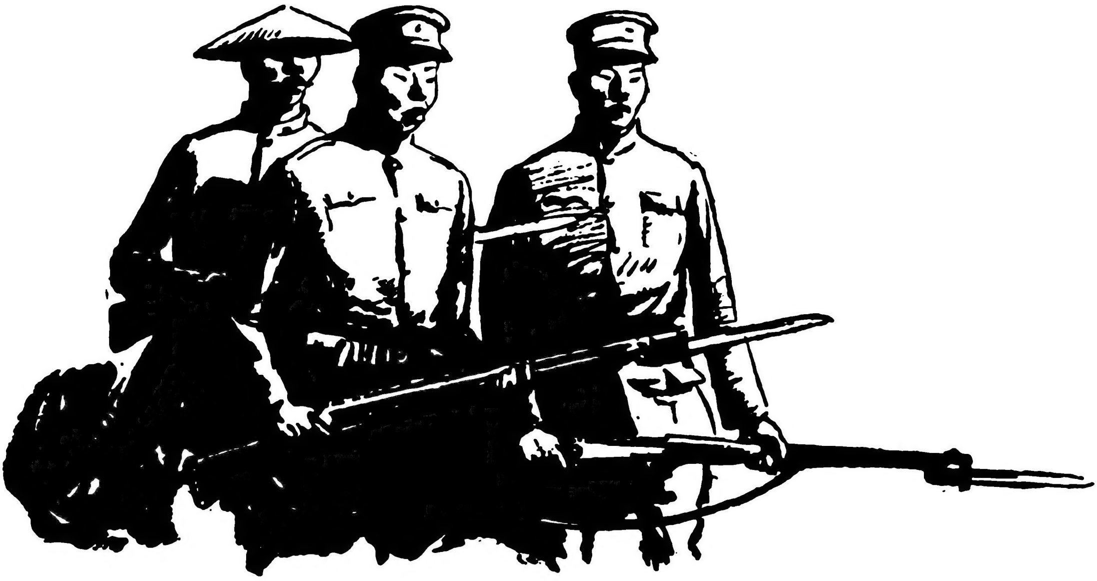


A Story of Strong Arm Diplomacy in China

FACE PIDGIN

By

L. G. BLOCHMAN

WHEN a noisy, ragged Chinese coolie cannot smile through his poverty, something is radically wrong with the universe. Externally the universe, of which the little river city of Ping-Chow was the center, appeared to be in pretty good working order. Spring had long since come to the Yangtze Valley. The narcissus about Dragon Lake had bloomed and faded. The red burrs of the litchi were bursting through the green of the hills. Chinese New Year had seen the debts of twelve months disappear in the smoke of incense and burning strings of silver-paper imitation money. The arrival of General Thompson's North Chinese mercenaries had put an end to the seesaw of power between rival militarists. Ping-Chow should be smiling.

But Ping-Chow frowned. At least the Chinese population of the Ping-Chow foreign concession was harboring a collective subcutaneous grouch. An unsettled strike of dock workers and river sailors had been bungled by the arrogance of G. Porter-Dawson, British chairman of the foreign municipality. Porter-Dawson thought he could end the strike by closing up the headquarters of the Chinese Maritime Workers' Guild. He succeeded merely in driving the agitation underground. An unseen directive force worked with mysterious thoroughness. The strike became general and the strikers became surly. Their surliness found an outlet in general antagonism to the European. The well-ordered and leisurely life of the foreigner in Ping-Chow was being disorganized with a disconcerting regularity that showed a vindictive central mind in perfect touch with the Chinese population of the port.

This incendiary central mind belonged to one Hwang Pi-Chen, Tuchun of Ping-Chow, known to foreigners as One-Armed Hwang. Hwang was anti-foreign because he owed his present security to a foreigner, and thus was entitled to hold the debtor's usual grudge against the creditor. Chased from his capital by an envious neighbor jealous of his prosperity, Hwang had been re-instated by troops he had bought from a northern Tuchun—several thousand mercenaries personally delivered by General Joe Thompson, an American who found it more exciting and profitable to be a Chinese general than a sergeant in the 15th United States Infantry at Tientsin. Once re-instated, Hwang resented Thompson's success and efficiency. What would Ping-Chow think of a Tuchun dependent upon the arms of a red-headed foreigner? Would it not look upon the white man as the true Tuchun? Hwang, all in regaining his city, felt he was losing face. Therefore Thompson must be sacrificed to "face pidgin," the term in which Treaty Port parlance sums up the worship of external show in the matter of prestige.

But Thompson was not easy to dismiss. Like a live wire, he was unpleasant to hold but almost impossible to release. Hwang needed those northern troops. Yet at least some of the troops were faithful to their American leader, and any strong-arm action on his person might prove a boomerang. So Hwang had seized upon the dockers' strike as a basis to build up a popular movement against foreigners in general and Thompson in particular.

Hwang's first step was to paralyze the foreign concession. Squads of intimidators drew away one class of workers after another. First the clerks and minor employees of foreign business houses left. Then disappeared the chair-bearers, who carried the European from the regular, well-swept streets of his extra-mural city into the swarming, odorous alleys of the old town, too narrow for wheeled traffic. Next the call extended to house-servants; and the wives of the voluntary expatriates, used to silent-slippered menials to do their slightest whim, suddenly found themselves in the unfamiliar precincts of their own kitchens, cooking indigestible meals and dipping their bejeweled fingers in dish-water. And there were no more ready-boys to pour out the libations at the Ping-Chow Overseas Club, where the bearers of the White Man's Burden gathered to tell each other the dangers of educating the Chinese to civilization, and to blame the missionaries for the decline of white prestige.

The missionaries, wrapped up in their own self-sufficient community clustered about the Ping-Chow Christian college within the walls, looked upon the paralysis of the concession as a visitation upon the whisky-drinking commercial colony for its un-Christian mode of living. There were even expressions of approval of the Chinese action—until the servants left the missionary homes as well.

But the smooth-tongued agitators inside the walls concentrated upon Thompson's soldiers. Old myths hawked about among the illiterate with considerable success during the Boxer uprising were being systematically revived; many of them made to turn on the personality of the American soldier. All foreigners had direct relations with occult and evil monsters—did not foreigners eat Chinese children on their feast days?—whereby the sound of foreign voices might cause deafness, and the shadow of smoke from foreign factory chimneys cause women to be sterile. The incarnation of a particularly evil spirit in a foreign body showed in some unusual color of hair as a warning to good ancestor-respecting Chinese.

The red-headed Thompson had been regarding the growing unrest as a mood which would pass. But one morning two bullets crashed through the window and shattered a Kiukiang vase in the bedroom of Thompson's house, not far from the Christian college, on the river side of the hill from which the multiple red-tiled roofs of the massive old Ming alarm tower dominated Ping-Chow. Before noon Thompson was on his way over the hill to the *yamen* of One-Armed Hwang, accompanied by Henry Pu Ting, his bulky Manchu interpreter.

A hedge of fixed bayonets surrounded the Spirit Wall which protected the Tuchuns green-tiled habitation from malicious oriental banshees. Six more guards commanded the approach to the vermillion brass-bound door behind the wall. Inside, across a court, was a one-roomed structure in which the Tuchun, pot-bellied, pock-marked and liver-lipped, squatted upon a huge yellow cushion of a low ebony divan. His benign expression of epicurean satisfaction at his own preparations to consume one of his seven daily meals was undisturbed by the entrance of Thompson and his aide.

While Henry Pu Ting was presenting the formal conversational prologue—praises of Hwang's forebears, wishes for his health, and hope for his continued wisdom and prosperity — Hwang was inspecting a chicken, varnished a bright red, with its head, comb and all, tucked under its wing, and its legs folded up and inserted in its rear person.

"Tell him there's going to be hell a-popping around here if somebody doesn't end that strike right away," said Thompson, "and ask him what he's going to do about it."

While Henry interpreted, Hwang brought the varnished fowl close to his flattened nose and smelled it all over.

"He say he have no business concession-side," interpreted Henry in reply. "Strike trouble b'long white man's trouble."

At this point Hwang ceremoniously offered the red fowl to Thompson, who waved it away impatiently.

"Tell him that it'll be everybody's trouble before long. Tell him that my army ain't any convention of brotherly love, and that it looks like we might have a little home-rule argument right in the ranks, which might fix things so I'd have to shoot a few dozen assorted mercenaries."

During the translation, Hwang thumped his chicken carefully and began tearing it limb from limb. Between mouthfuls he gave vent to some ventriloquistic sounds.

"He say too bad, too bad," was the version Henry gave them. "China army very foolish, might sometime like killing foreign-devil general. Maybe better you go away, let army killing each other, he say."

Thompson exhaled sharply.

"You ask him if I look like a guy that would get up and leave a good fight just before the main event of the evening," he said, raising his voice. "No, don't tell him that. Tell him that if anyone wants me to get outa Ping-Chow, they'll have to put me out. Tell him I'll settle the dang strike myself. I'll be here at nine o'clock tonight to tell him how I did it."

Hwang laid down the debris of a drumstick, gave a prolonged eructation, and grunted. An emaciated menial immediately brought a steaming towel which Hwang first used to wipe his flabby face and then passed over his shaven head. Then he spoke again.

"He say can see nobody nine o'clock," said Henry. "Nine o'clock coming to *yamen* Golden Lotus Blossom, Number One sing-song girl Shanghai-side, coming privately making music for Tuchun. Sorry."

Thompson turned and walked out with long strides, while Henry Pu Ting tried to cover his unceremonious exit with a flowery speech of departure.

II

WHEN Thompson told Hwang he would "settle the dang strike himself," he was speaking with the exuberance of youth and springtime rather than with any plan in mind. Although he was a born fighter and a bred disciplinarian, he was no clairvoyant. He had not yet detected the lone, pudgy hand of Hwang in the mess that was stewing. Neither had he imagined the muddling persistence with which a British administrator might cling to the idea of his own superiority. However, he went directly to the man who for some fifteen years had done everything official there was to be done in the concession: G. Porter-Dawson, O.B.E., district manager of the Eastern and Oriental Export Company, chairman of the Ping-Chow foreign municipality, chief of the concession police, inspector of mails, and master of Ping-Chow Lodge No. 6,788.

Porter-Dawson was in conference with Harold Helvington, vice-chairman of the municipality and agent for the Lion Petroleum Company, Limited, when Thompson approached the stern red-brick building of the Eastern and Oriental compound on the riverfront. Two red-turbaned, square-whiskered Sikhs were keeping a crowd of tattered strikers at a respectful distance. Thompson walked through deserted corridors—the Chinese staff had joined the strike the day before—and entered the office of the manager.

"Howdy, gents," he said as he pushed the door open before him. He saw the plump, red-faced, sleek-haired Helvington and was about to remove his highly decorative cap. Then he caught sight of the austere Porter-Dawson and pulled it on more securely. He felt the need of its gold-braided authority to offset the ferocity of those protruding eyebrows and Indian Army mustaches, defiantly black despite the steel-gray hair. Thompson smoothed the chest of his gray uniform and hooked his thumbs in his Sam Brown belt. Then he said:

"You're the big joss of the city fathers, ain't you, Mister Porter-hyphen-Dawson?"

"I am chairman of the municipal council."

"Well then, why don't you climb outa your chair and put a stop to this here strike? There's eight shiploads of rice rotting in the port for three weeks, the heathens are in an ugly mood and ready to cut all your throats, and all you do is close up their unions so you won't know where to find their chiefs."

"The men can go back to work at any time," replied Porter-Dawson with an undulatory motion of his eyebrows.

"For thirty cents a day?"

"They would get fifteen from a Chinese port administration."

"They only ask forty. Why don't you compromise?"

Helvington appeared about to say something but Porter-Dawson cut in authoritatively with, "We would lose."

"Making a terrific pile right now, aren't you."

"You don't understand. We would lose—prestige."

"Face pidgin!" Thompson snorted. "You'd build a railroad to Ping-Chow before you'd let it be said you gave in to a chink."

"What you don't seem to understand—neither you nor the Reverend Thorn who came down from the Christian college to honor us with a visit this morning—is that to yield to the Chinese would cost us not a few cents but something like $30,000 a year—to say nothing of the precedent which would be set. Of course, the Reverend Thorn thinks the Europeans ought to yield because they are the stronger. He says we are destroying his life work. While the missionaries inside the walls preach Christian virtue, humility and generosity, their Christian brethren in the concession loll in vice and oppress the weak. All that he's afraid of is losing face with his disciples."

"I'm agreed with the Reverend that this here strike ought to be struck out," said Thompson.

The twisted ends of the Porter-Dawson mustaches alternately became elevated and depressed to register inner cynical amusement.

"You would probably be interested to know that the Reverend Thorn thinks you are a low person and responsible for the present state of the Chinese mind," said Porter-Dawson. "He calls you an adventurous roustabout and a professional butcher."

"Let him call," replied Thompson. "He can call as loud as he wants, but I won't hear him. And so can you. Don't go bellowing for help from me when your pig-headedness gets you into hot water. Look out the window at that crowd. They're getting nasty. Your puny little Ping-Chow volunteer corps won't have a chance with their fifty rifles."

"The consuls have wired Shanghai for gunboats."

"They ain't here yet," was Thompson's comment. "And in the meantime don't count on me."

"We don't," said Porter-Dawson with a sneer. "We never have considered you altogether white."

"Oh, I'll make just as handsome a corpse as you will," retorted Thompson, looking out the window at the mob of strikers milling about outside the compound. "But in the meantime I must be going. So long, gents."

Helvington, who had not said a word during the whole interview, caught Thompson before he left the building.

"I say, General."

In Porter-Dawson's office Helvington's nether quarters had been hidden behind a desk. Now Thompson noticed for the first time that he was wearing kilts.

"Been doing a little bally dancing?" he laughed.

Helvington did not laugh. His usually florid face was pale and he spoke seriously, almost beseechingly to the American.

"It's my uniform when I was leftenant in the Shanghai Scottish," he said, "and all the Ping-Chow volunteers are out today. It looks bad. Porter-Dawson won't admit it, but it does. I've been watching that crowd, too. Somebody's deliberately stirring them up against us."

"Well?"

"You're right about our volunteers being hardly enough to protect the concession. We won't be able to lift a hand to help the missionaries inside the walls."

"That's the first time I ever heard you birds show any concern for the Bible crowd."

"A common danger, General, brings all us whites closer together," said Helvington. "That's why I take the liberty of asking your help. Look here, General. What with this strike and all the cargo held up in the stream, the community is running short of food. That's what Dr. Thorn came down to tell us about this morning. The missionaries are all assembled in the compound of the Ping-Chow Christian college for protection, and their food is just about gone. Porter-Dawson says he won't do anything, so——"

"So you wanted me to go down and unload them ships, didn't you? Well, I'm a soldier, not a stevedore."

"No, General," replied Helvington. "I've got a crew of strike-breakers furnished me by a pretty high Chinese official who wants to see this thing settled. But they're afraid of the strikers. I thought maybe you would muster a guard to protect us while we unload just one ship—the *Nanchang*, say. She's just off the bund, so close in that river thieves have stolen her anchors. What about it, General?"

"Them missionaries think I'm the scum of the earth. Why should I do anything to help 'em?"

"They're your countrymen, General."

The ex-sergeant shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Anyone who called him "General," as persistently as Helvington, was entitled to some consideration. He paused.

"You better consider me a chink in this business," he said at last. "I'm a chink general, ain't I?"

"You're an American," said Helvington. "You can't help it."

Thompson moistened his thin lips thoughtfully, then slowly removed his cap and ran his fingers through his red hair.

"Listen, Helvington," he began slowly. "I wouldn't so much as pass a hand in a little penny-ante bush-league evening to help them religion peddlers. If they're starving, they probably deserve it. Still, if vittles are getting scarce, I may be needing rice pretty soon myself, for my army. So I'll be on the bund with a few squads at six this evening."

III

THE *Nanchang*, a rusty, red-funneled river steamer, lay moored at the head of the idle fleet riding the muddy current of the Yangtze off Ping-Chow. Helvington's strike-breakers and a score of Thompson's highest-salaried mercenaries were sculled out to the ship in a barge. Thompson and Henry Pu Ting went out a little later in a small sampan which they tied up under the stern.

"I'm superstitious, Henry," Thompson explained his refusal to go in the barge. "Whenever I get the glass shot out of my bedroom window of a morning, I kinda look out for bad luck the rest of the day."

Helvington's coolies had brought up a few sacks when Thompson came aboard, but they lay on the deck beside the open hatches. The guard of mercenaries lined the rail. Helvington was pacing the deck, his ruddy face beaming at the prospect of getting the rice ashore. Thompson went to the open forward hatch and looked into the hold.

"Hey!" he called to Helvington. "You better go below and see what's happened to your coolies. I only see about five of 'em working. They must be looking for something to steal."

When Helvington had been gone a few moments a shout came from belowdecks. Immediately several dozen coolies swarmed out of the hold and a neighboring companionway and scrambled silently over the side into the barge, while Thompson's guards looked on with disinterested amusement. Helvington shouted again.

"What's the trouble?" yelled Thompson down the hatch.

"Fire!" yelled back Helvington. "The blighters have been sprinkling the place with Lion Petroleum Company's Grade-A kerosene. But it's all right. I surprised them away before they could put it alight."

Thompson turned to watch the barge-load of coolies, now sculling furiously for the shore.

"Jumping joss sticks!" exclaimed Thompson. "It ain't all right. We're adrift."

"Adrift!" echoed Helvington disconsolately. "And there isn't an anchor on board!"

"I'm going to try to beach her," Thompson shouted again, running to the stern with the panicky Henry Pu Ting in tow. The coolies had thrown off the lines which held the ship's head fast to the mooring buoys, and the *Nanchang* was drifting downstream stern first into the fleet of abandoned ships.

"Jump on that hand-wheel, Henry. You're hefty. And whistle for a couple of them wooden soldiers there. Go on, climb up them spokes. That's it. Haul away, you there! This ain't like driving a flivver."

The *Nanchang* was gaining momentum, but the current had not yet completely overcome the original inertia. With the rudder jammed far to one side, the drifting ship began to swing. The current now bore on the bow, and soon her nose was fast in the mud. After a violent shudder, she settled to starboard.

"Where the hell did you get them there strike-breakers?" inquired Thompson of Helvington who had come up just in time to be thrown to the deck by the shock. "They're beaut's."

"I can't understand why they should act like this. The Tuchun himself offered their services."

Thompson stopped short in the middle of a gesture to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

"One-Armed Hwang, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And was Hwang the guy that suggested you'd better have me and my gang come aboard as a guard?"

"Well, yes, he did rather. I say, where are you going, General?"

"I'm going ashore to give your friend Hwang some lessons in strike-breaking," said Thompson. "It seems as though my health depends on it. Say, Henry, what time is that Shanghai flousy—what's her name, Golden Lotus Blossom? What time is she due at Hwang's *yamen?* Nine o'clock? Do you know what street she's liable to take? Is it a dark one? Well, pick me out the huskiest man in this here so-called guard and slip down the rope with him into the sampan. Tell the rest to stay and help Mister Helvington with his rice. Yes, I know they're lazy, but wait." He went through his pockets. "I got exactly twenty-three Mexican dollars on me. I'll keep the three cart-wheels for good luck, and you can give the rest to the boys as a bonus for stevedoring."

Helvington appeared both disappointed and contemptuous.

"I'm sorry you're deserting us like this, Thompson," he said. "Still, the H.M.S. *Iron Sparrow* may arrive before dawn. She has marines on board. They'll be dependable."

Thompson had started over the side. He paused astride the rail to say, "Well, if you get another of those good ideas about this here strike, tell it to the marines."

IV

IN THE central chamber of his *yamen*, an edifice across the court from the green-tiled gate with the vermillion portals, One-Armed Hwang was awaiting Golden Lotus Blossom with a contented passivity which told of great pleasures already being enjoyed in anticipation. Porcelain dragons, which Hwang's grandfather had brought back from the Taiping siege of Nanking, breathed flames in each corner of the room, giving out an unsteady saffron light which flashed on the silver cylinder of Hwang's water pipe, caressed the yellow silken cushions, and threw dancing, dissolving shadows into the pile of furs at the foot of Hwang's ebony divan. The wavering light now and then brought to life golden ideographs on the black ancestor tablets in a far corner, before which the glowing ends of incense sticks formed a red constellation.

As he heard the great red doors swing back on their brass hinges, Hwang took a long jade-headed pin and dug a smoking wad out of the thimblelike recess of his water pipe. When the step of palanquin-bearers sounded on the flags of the courtyard, he smoothed out the empty sleeve of his flowered satin jacket. He smiled as the bearers entered the lozenge-shaped door, but as they set the gold-and-red palanquin on the rugs before him, he ceased smiling, for he noticed that the bearers were panting, and that beads of perspiration stood out on their high foreheads. True, they were fat, these palanquin-bearers—wasn't there something familiar about the features of the fatter one with black goggles and a mustache? But he had heard that Golden Lotus Blossom was small, and dainty, and as light as a summer cloud on San-Miao-Chan. The recollection brought back the smile, now accompanied by a sensuous gleam in his eyes. He reached forward his lone hand to lift the scarlet silken curtain which hid the occupant of the chair. A masculine grasp on his wrist made him wince, as a broad calloused hand covered his mouth and pushed his face back into a smother of pillows.

From the perfumed recesses of the palanquin there then came not the dainty, enameled doll's head and voluptuous bound feet of Golden Lotus Blossom, but the bristling red head and number elevens of General Joe Thompson.

"I suppose you think this little surprise party ain't sporting," said Thompson, as he threw himself on the ample abdomen of the now-prostrate Tuchun, "you having only one arm to my two. But if you hadn't been trying to scalp me with that one arm of yours, I wouldn't be sitting on you like this now, you sneaking, low-down, yellow-bellied, back-stabbing son of a heathen. You're a no-good, underhanded tub o' lard, you are. Tell him all that, Henry. No, don't tell him anything. He wouldn't appreciate it, and we ain't got the time. Pass me that rope."

The more portly of the improvised palanquin-bearers stopped wiping his brow and took a coil of rope from the palanquin.

"Fix his legs," said Thompson. "And before I take my hand off his mouth, will you explain that I got in my pocket a high-powered razor which works without a sound, and I'll be forced to remove his tonsils if he raises his voice."

Hwang made no effort to shout when allowed to sit up, securely tied. He appeared quite calm as he chanted a few syllables at Henry Pu Ting, who translated.

"He say he feel much honor for pleasure of unforseen visit."

"Cut the acting," protested Thompson. "I got a couple of your calling cards today, and it ain't your fault that I'm healthy enough to return the politeness. I come to tell you that I got enough of this being murdered by proxy. I'm used to fightin' on the level, and if you ain't up to it, why I'm taking my army outa here tomorrow. Tell him that, Henry."

The nostrils of the flattened nose of Hwang Pi-Chen expanded and contracted slightly in a movement of contemptuous disbelief. His lips scarcely moved as he let fall a sentence to be picked up by Henry Pu Ting.

"You have got no army now, he say."

Thompson drew an old-fashioned razor, opened and examined it carefully.

"I got enough army to be its delegate in a matter of collective bargaining. I come here for the collecting part. Mister Hwang, to get my army outa here quick like I want, I gotta have ships. There's plenty of ships around, but no sailors. So I'm going to have to end this here strike. And the only way I can see of ending it is to fix up some way so both sides can save face. That means that you'll have to put up the cash to pay the difference between the old and new wages for a year. It'll cost you just about $30,000 Mex. Next to nothing; three days' salt taxes and opium money. Anyhow you ought to be glad to do it. It's kinda been your private strike, all in all."

Hwang's reply was short and quiet.

"Maybe no can do so much money," translated Henry. "He asks what will be happening."

"*Skrevich!*" was the sound Thompson made to indicate phonetically the action of a razor on a Chinese throat.

The expression on Hwang's pitted, lead-colored face did not change. It even relaxed a trifle as he leaned back on his cushions and began spinning a well-modulated string of intonations. He punctuated his talk with dramatic pauses and bass drawls. His narrow eyes smiled just a trifle as he watched Henry Pu Ting give alarmed sidelong glances in Thompson's direction.

"Hwang Pi-Chen not afraid," he interpreted. "He say impossible to murder him. He have commanded wholesale and retail killings within compound of Ping-Chow Christian college. Tonight many white Christians going meet luscious rewards Heavenside. Plenty piece machine-gun hiding topside next-door houses. Many knife-killers also waiting grand signal pretty quick. Hwang dead, nobody can stop signal, all white missionary brothers dying. He say you will not kill Hwang Pi-Chen."

IF THIS revelation upset any of Thompson's calculations, it certainly did not upset his composure. Maybe it was just a bluff, anyhow. If it was, two could play the same game.

"That bunch of psalm-singers don't mean a thing to me and Hwang knows it," said Thompson deliberately. "We ain't got a point in common. What do I care if he wants to rid this here earth of a few dozen Bible-punchers? Compatriots of mine? They don't think so. Now that I reflect on the matter, I think it's probably a good idea to bump a few off. More and better massacres, say I. All I want is a strike settlement, ships, and for that purpose, money or as good."

Hwang watched Thompson closely during the translation, as though he were trying to estimate the red-headed adventurer's sincerity. He spoke again and Henry Pu Ting translated.

"Pretty soon comes signal, killing starts. Tomorrow, he says, marine sailors arrive, consul tell 'em catch General Thompson. Tonight all missionary killers wear uniform of Thompson soldier."

"Say listen, Henry." Thompson pulled out a red hair and ostentatiously tested his razor. "Tell this bird not to waste any more time telling about his pet massacres. We all got our hobbies—I used to collect cigar bands myself—but his little fads don't interest me in the least. What I want now is Hwang's *chop* at the bottom of an agreement to pay $30,000 and end the strike. He's an awful crook, but he's Chinese, and I never seen a chink yet who didn't respect his *chop*. Give him thirty seconds to decide. Will he do what I ask, or will I operate on his jugular vein?"

Hwang breathed noisily for a moment as his eyes wandered from one to another of his dragon lamps. Suddenly he shifted his glance to Thompson, expecting to find on his face some unconscious indication of real purpose. He saw nothing written in the blue-gray eyes or the thin, straight lips but determination. There had been renegade white men before. It was quite possible that Thompson cared nothing for his doomed countrymen of the mission.

The Tuchun nodded toward a carved table on which was a red-lacquered box of writing materials. Thompson loosened the rope ties, and immediately Hwang's lone arm dived under the cushions. Thompson was as quick as he was.

"No you don't," he said, twisting a tiny nickeled revolver from the Tuchun's grasp. "As Confuscius says, 'the writing brush is mightier than the six-shooter.' Pass 'em over, Henry."

Thompson dictated the text, Henry Pu Ting interpreted, and Hwang, with his brush-and-ink block, scrawled ideographs up and down one side of rice paper. Then he reluctantly took a cube of green stone from a little chamois bag, pressed its carved surface on a smudge of vermillion, and printed at the bottom of the sheet the entwined conventional characters representing his signature and word of honor. Once given, this paper represented surrender. Hwang laid down his brush, half-closed his eyes, and waited as though intending to get it back.

Thompson picked up the paper, folded it, and tucked it inside his coat. With this settlement of his difficulties buttoned away, he was five years younger. He took up the slack in the rope that bound the Tuchun, and gave a joyous flip with the loose end.

"And now," he said lightly, "what's all this business about signals to shoot up my friends the missionaries?"

This was Hwang's clue. He had been counting on racial solidarity to give him a hold over this soldier. Thompson's apparent indifference to the fate of his fellow white's had thrown him off at first. But Thompson's last question brought Hwang back to his original thesis. He cleared his throat confidently. Then he made a face which might have been taken for a cynical smile. Finally he spoke. If the flame-haired white man wished to discuss the safety of his compatriots, he had only to return or destroy the paper the Tuchun had just given him. Negotiations could then, but not until then, be begun.

"Don't give me any of that stuff," said Thompson, flourishing his razor "or I'll have to act like a freshman in barber college."

Hwang became silent and disdainful, now that he felt strong in his position.

Without replying, he turned his head back, baring his flabby throat with full assurance that Thompson would not carry out his threat.

Thompson made a swipe with his razor and cut a corner from the pillow under the Tuchun. This he stuffed in Hwang's mouth.

"Grab his legs," he ordered Henry, "and swing him into the wheel-less barrow."

Hwang's eyes were bulging, and he made inarticulate sounds as he was lifted into the palanquin.

"I'm going to have to torture you guys for about three minutes," said Thompson to his bearers pro tem. "You're going to have to pack us both until we get past the guards. Move over, Hwang, and quit squirming like that."

AS THE ornate palanquin was carried laboriously through the outer gate of the *yamen,* two sentries halted the bearers. One of them sniffed at the perfumed hangings, exchanged joking comments with his comrade regarding the supposed occupant, and then waved the chair on.

Henry Pu Ting headed the palanquin into a forbiddingly narrow street, a mere cleft between two buildings, of which the darkness was punctuated by a blood-red drop of light, far away, it seemed. The bearers set down their burden and Thompson climbed out.

"Now you can tell this hunk of lying blubber that we are now heading direct for the massacre zone with no stop-over privileges. If there is to be general killing in the compound of the Christian college tonight, there'll be probably enough bullets for a few uninvited guests like us. All aboard."

Upward through black, silent streets the palanquin moved, mounting toward the crest of the hill. Here and there a shimmering crack of light or the minor lament of a one-stringed fiddle indicated life, but life behind closed doors, life already secretive and made doubly so by the sensitive Chinese reaction to the tense atmosphere of the city for the past few days. The palanquin passed the crest and started down the steep lane that ran from the multiple-roofed alarm tower toward the Christian college. As the bearers braced themselves with each step on the down slope, the forward lurch of the palanquin gave the pinioned Tuchun a vague idea of the road he was following. He writhed and emitted muffled squeals.

"Maybe he'll talk now," said Thompson, halting the bearers. "But before you take the pillow outa his mouth, Henry, warn him that it'd be bad for his throat to talk above a whisper."

Hwang spit bits of cotton for a moment, then gurgled a bit. Finally Henry Pu Ting was able to translate.

"It is all a great joke," he said with as much dignity as his posture would permit. "There is to be no massacre. It was a story I invented to test my general's sentiments. But it is not true. There is no danger. It is all a joke."

"Back with the wadding," ordered Thompson without hesitation. "Pack him on down to the missionary compound, and we'll see just how funny this joke is."

Henry Pu Ting would have been quite content to sacrifice the mission community to avoid packing the obese Tuchun any farther. But he and his companion shouldered the palanquin again and plodded on through dark and odorous streets, and badly paved alleys slippery with refuse.

Suddenly Henry stopped with a jerk, panted for a moment, then said, "Once more wiggling."

"Put him down," ordered Thompson. "Maybe he'll tell the truth this time."

Even in the darkness Hwang's eyes gleamed. They were wide open as his gag was removed. He was ready to surrender, since he saw no other way of escaping the death he had planned for others. His fear vouched for his sincerity now. He talked earnestly to Henry Pu Ting.

And Henry translated. There was indeed to be a massacre. Machine guns were in place on a dozen housetops. Hwang's men were on all sides of the Christian college compound, awaiting a signal. At midnight seven flares would appear on the upturned eaves of the topmost roof of the old Ming alarm tower. This was the order for Hwang's seven subordinates to attack the missionary colony.

"He say take him back to his *yamen* and he give you *chit* to Wong Hsu, telling to unlight torch fires," said Henry.

"*Chit* hell," replied Thompson. "Take him up to my mess and throw him in the room with Golden Lotus Blossom and her bearers. You can untie them all tomorrow morning. I'll see about Wong Hsu and the flares myself. In the meantime— Jumping joss sticks!" Thompson looked closely at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch, listened to hear if it were going, looked again, and repeated, "Jumping joss sticks! Pray to all your gods, Henry, that Wong Hsu's watch ain't fast. Mine says four minutes to twelve."

Thompson was gone in a cloud of profanity. His running footsteps resounded on the uneven flags as he mounted the crooked lane that wound its unhygienic way up the hill toward the Ming alarm tower. He could see the tower now, its shadowy bulk jutting up above the houses before him. A sky filled with haze, gilded by a still hidden moon, threw into sharp relief the barbaric outlines of its sweeping roofs, each rising above a wider terrace. Suddenly he stopped. There was a group of Chinese soldiers in the street before him.

He could not go back now and take another street, for he would lose the two minutes remaining before the fatal flares were to appear on the top of the tower. The soldiers were not to be passed unseen, either, for they entirely blocked the narrow alley. They were Hwang's men; he could tell from the intonation of their southern dialect.

The seconds ticked away. Even now he would hardly have time to reach the tower and climb to the first platform. How many steps, now? One hundred something? No matter. He must act quickly. He retreated a few paces to a bend in the alley and slipped behind the short section of wall which warded off the evil spirits from the door of some superstitious merchant. Automatically he thrust his hand in his pocket, and his fingers closed on the three silver dollars he had saved that afternoon on board the *Nanchang*. The touch of the metal gave him an idea, and he tossed one of the dollars toward the soldiers. It fell with a loud ring on the cobbles.

A soldier with a rifle slung over his shoulder came down the alley toward the sound. He sauntered leisurely for a few steps. Would he never hurry? Thompson's watch marked one minute to twelve.

He threw another dollar. Curious but cautious, the soldier came further, bending slightly to search the ground. God, he was slow! Now he was quite a distance from his comrades. At last he came opposite the wall.

Thompson pounced on his back, tripped him, and knocked his head against the ground. As the soldier went down without a sound, the American tore the rifle from his back and dodged behind the wall to scale it from the inside. A moment later he was slipping and climbing over the tiled roof of the house the wall was to protect from demons.

He saw a light moving about the first platform of the alarm tower and glanced at the magazine of his recently acquired rifle. It was full. He felt the position of the rear sight and calculated the distance. The light was gone. It appeared again and started to move upward over the silhouetted face of the tower. Wong Hsu was climbing the ladder to light the seven flares, signal for the death of the missionary community of Ping-Chow. Thompson raised his rifle and fired.

The light still moved upward, flickering slightly as the torch caught a puff of wind.

Thompson had missed, but the shot attracted the attention of the soldiers in the street. Cries came up from below, and the crackle of a rifle volley. Thompson made a fine target standing there on the roof. What had come over him, he asked himself, to expose himself so blatantly? He would— Something snapped in, or against him. He felt a stinging sensation in his shoulder. No matter. The light was still moving upward on the tower. It was near the top platform now. He fired again.

The torch dropped like a meteor and expired in a shower of sparks on the first platform. Wong Hsu would not light the flares which Hwang's assassins were awaiting.

Thompson noted with surprise that the rifle slipped through the fingers which vainly tried to hold it. His whole side was growing numb. The street was still filled with menacing cries, but they seemed to be getting fainter and fainter. The silhouette of the alarm tower faded, and the roof careened beneath his feet. His knees gave way, and he fell face forward on the tiles.

When he opened his eyes he was still lying on the roof. His shoulder throbbed painfully. The street was quiet. He tried to move, and the throbbing increased. It even echoed in the street. He must be crazy it couldn't echo in the street. But it did, and louder now. No, it was the sound of feet he heard, feet and hoofs. He heard voices, now.

He took the last dollar from his pocket and tossed it over the roof into the street. As it rang to the flags, an occidental voice cried, "Whoa!" Then another said, "Did you drop something, Mr. Helvington?"

"He did not," Thompson summoned enough strength to say. "I did."

Then he rolled over and sat up, looking down into the street, where the moonlight revealed a train of miniature donkeys under a load of heavy sacks. White men in uniform walked alongside.

"Hello, there," said Harold Helvington, who was standing beside a young officer. "The *Iron Sparrow* got in all right and put ashore a detachment of marines. We're just taking the rice up to the Christian college. They can have it for breakfast. I say, what are you doing up there?"

Thompson put his hand inside his blouse. His shirt was warm and sticky, but his fingers touched the folded paper he had wrung from Hwang.

"Why, I been stopping the strike," he replied, "and a few bullets."

V

IT WAS a great social honor that was being conferred upon red-headed Joe Thompson, his being received at the Ping-Chow Overseas Club on this gala night. He was even having a Scotch and Tan-San with G. Porter-Dawson, O.B.E., although he did not seem fully to appreciate the honor. Thompson, with his arm in a sling, was contemplating with complete objectivity the hilarity and general gusto which the Ping-Chow commercial colony was celebrating the end of the strike.

Porter-Dawson, on the other hand, with each succeeding glass, sank into deeper satisfaction over what seemed to him to be more and more his own achievement.

"Would you believe it," he asked Harold Helvington, who sat across the table from Thompson, "that those Yankee missionaries are holding a big religious meeting tonight? They're telling all their proselytes that prayer ended the strike. It was British tenacity, that's what it was. Of course, the missionaries have to save face with their people."

"We saved face ourselves," suggested Helvington.

"Our face pidgin won through," said Porter-Dawson, partly with his eyebrows. "One-Armed Hwang would have never pungled over that money to Thompson if we hadn't stood firm."

Thompson's steel-blue eyes seemed to smile wistfully.

"Hwang himself must consider he's saving face," said Helvington, "since you're leaving Ping-Chow, General Thompson."

"I been called to higher purposes," said Thompson, fishing a sack of tobacco from his pocket with his good arm. "I got a wire from my boss, General Liao, this morning. He told me to sell out the army and come to Shanghai, where he's got a big deal on."

"But aren't you losing face, running away like this?" inquired Porter-Dawson.

"Oh, I dunno." Thompson seemed entirely engrossed in rolling a cigaret with one hand. "I dunno. Maybe I ain't succeeded in saving much face. But I did save a helluva lot of necks."

In the next issue General Joe Thompson runs into the most amazing adventure of his career in "The Slant Eyed Flapper."

A Complete Novelette

A Western Story of the Great Ranges and a Youngster With a Fighting Heart

The Lone YOUNG 'UN

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

CHAPTER I

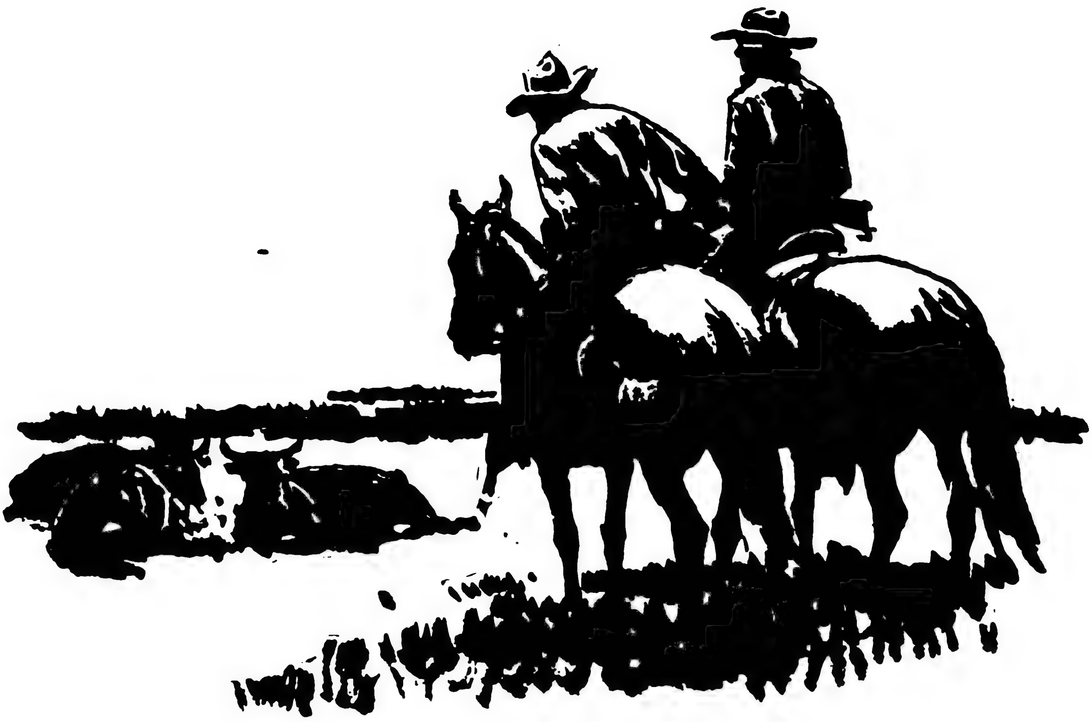
FIFTEEN HEAD

TWO men, one with silver hair and the other with the thick, black locks of twenty-two, were driving a small herd of cattle down a valley. The valley was some twenty-seven miles long, and the two men were five miles from the north end. They had brought the cattle from the extreme north end, where they had been held over night in a small box-canyon, a dent in the northern wall of the valley.

For twenty-two miles the valley ran almost due north and south. Then it turned abruptly at a waterfall and ran northwest. The waterfall made a pool at the foot of the valley's western wall, and a stream which never dried up, even in the hottest weather, flowed across the floor of the valley, which, here, was six miles wide. This stream became a creek along the eastern wall and disappeared somewhere among the southern hills.

The two men were driving the cattle slowly, their admiring eyes on them. They were a goodly bunch of cattle, not stringy Texans but heavier, sleeker Herefords, imported from the East. Their leader was a three year old bull, an animal with massive shoulders, red eyes, and nostrils which were apt to dilate wetly on occasion. It was a small herd, but as a foundation herd it could hardly have been improved upon.

These men were Edward Drew and his son, George. They were lately come from Tennessee. They knew more about horses than they knew about cattle. But they were hardy men, and they had been in this cattle country for six months, so that they had picked up a good deal of information about cattle. They had known, of course, that they must have land and plenty of it, and to their satisfaction they had found that land was plentiful out here. Water was plentiful, too. The country was made up of hills and valleys, with mountains in the distance; and waterfalls such as the one at the bend were numerous. In another country they would not have been able to find so suitable a place not already taken over. In their own country they had lived on the Tennessee River, a muddy stream, but with plenty of water, so that they were not now fully appreciative of their good luck.



Till six months ago they had never seen a corral, but they had not needed to be specially alert to know how a corral should be built, or the uses to which it should be put. In the building of log cabins they had some skill; and since there were trees in the valley they had had no difficulty in providing themselves with a home, a two room oblong shack, not spacious, but as spacious as the one they had had in Tennessee, even before the mammy of the boy and the wife of the man had died.

No Westerner was more natively intimate with firearms than these two. They were not unfamiliar with revolvers, but they knew more about rifles. A rifle in the hands of either was a deadly weapon. As soon, however, as they had learned that a six-gun was held in more esteem than a rifle in this country, they had accommodated themselves to six-guns. A little practise had made them good shots with the heavy weapons, but their skill on the draw was nothing to marvel at. Each now wore a gun in a holster, but they also had rifles slung in front of their saddles. These cattle were very precious to them, and though they had not known what they would do with the rifles if the red-eyed bull decided on a stampede, they had felt more easy in their minds because of the weapons before them.

The bull had been an undecided creature along the whole five miles. Even these amateurs knew that he had something on his mind. He was prevented from a bolt, however, by the fact that he had been shut up in the little canyon through the night and by the fact that there had been abundant grass to be nipped at in the leisurely march. He was further restrained by the smell of water in the morning air. He sniffed in anticipation, but his stomach was not yet full of grass, and he plodded on, nipping fast. Behind him the cows came obediently.

Their progress brought them about nine o'clock to the bend. The bull trotted toward the pool and the cows followed him. There was room for all of them about it, and they drank eagerly. The man and the youngster circled behind them, ready to drive them toward the corral when they had finished drinking. Beyond the corral was the shack, and this the youngster looked at with a glow in eyes usually somber. Already he was in love with this country, and the little home seemed a symbol of peace and prosperity to come.

He did not think it singular that he had longed for peace and prosperity. There was a reason for that, and he alone knew the reason. He had come from a line of men and women whose lives had not been too peaceful. Some of those men and women had had feuds in which there had been brutal bloodshed. To kill a man was held to be a sacred right, if that man deserved killing. He had seen black-haired, black-eyed mountaineers stand up and shoot at each other till one or sometimes both went down mortally wounded. But something had happened to young Drew, something which had made him breathe this air more deeply, something which had brought that glow to his eyes, and which had elbowed him away from his heritage.

"They're about finished, George," Drew said, noting that the bull had lifted his head and was viewing his new surroundings. "Aidge up on them."

The two men moved slowly toward the cattle. The cattle seemed simultaneously to have taken their fill. They were replete with grass and water. They would as lief lie down as not. Under the gentle urging of the two men, the animals, headed by the bull, moved forward, and luckily the bull passed between the wings of the chute. He crossed the corral and nosed at the fence. The cows followed him. George slipped from his horse and put up the bars.

JUST outside the chute there was a pile of sticks, ready for the match, and thrust into the pile was an iron. Running irons were still in use, but neither of the men knew how to use one. Therefore the elder Drew, who had done his own blacksmithing all his life, had fashioned a rude branding-iron. The brand was peculiar. If either man had been called upon to describe it, as was the custom, he would have had difficulty in doing so. First Drew had fashioned a D, the first letter of his name. To the left from the perpendicular line of the D he had made three horizontal marks. This was supposed to form an E. Drew could read print a little but he could not write, and he had not noticed that he was fashioning his E left-handedly till the work was done. Then he had said it would be good enough.

"We done a right smart of a job, Gawgie," Drew now said. "Reckon we better slap the brand on the bull first. Hit will be a job, an' hit is a good idea to git the hardest job done first. You climb the fence an' be ready to put up the other bars when I get that ol' feller in the chute."

"You ain't goin' in there on foot, are you, pappy?" George asked. "That man at the Bar M ranch tol' us to keep away from cows when we was on foot."

"I aim to ride in thar," Drew said with dignity. "I dunno much about cows, but I kin still ride a hoss."

They had fashioned rude bars at both ends of the chute, and now Drew pointed his horse toward the outer bars and motioned his son to lower them. George took hold of one to draw it toward him through its slot. But he did not exert the pull. A man had come around the corner of their cabin. He was dressed as all the men with whom they had lately associated had been dressed, boots coming to the calves of his legs, overalls, blue shirt, wide hat. He was a man of perhaps forty, and he wore a closely trimmed beard. Beneath his hat brim, even at this distance, his eyes were steady and cold. Also his hand rested on the butt of the gun which was slung on his hip. George was aware somehow that this man was not alone. George's eyes went to the other corner of the cabin. A man who was a duplicate of the first man stood there. As George looked, a second man came up behind him, and then, as George's eyes went to the first man, another man joined him from the rear of the cabin. Four men in all, each armed with the six-shooter which George knew was so deadly in hands of men like these.

The newcomers stood perfectly motionless. There was a good deal of menace in their bearing. But if they had thought to awe these two men from the southern mountains, they had calculated without knowing the past of the two. The elder Drew had looked more than once into the muzzle of a rifle held by an enemy. George had never slain, but he had seen others slain. Encounters a good deal like this had been common to their ancestors from the time they had come into what was then a part of North Carolina. So the two Tennesseeans simply stood as motionless as the other men and gave them stare for stare. They made no move to reach for any of their weapons. Neither could think of any reason for a quarrel with these men. Certainly there was no old feud to be settled here.

Their survey seemed to have satisfied the newcomers, and they simultaneously moved forward. They came up till they were within a few feet of the horses of the two other men. The eyes of the first man ran over the cattle in the corral and then to the pile of sticks which were to have made the branding fire. Noticing the iron protruding from the pile, he walked over to it and plucked the iron out. He looked intently at the crude design and then he turned to Drew.

"What in hell kind of a brand is that?" he asked.

"ED," Drew answered. "First letters of my name."

The man looked at the design again, shook his head as if the problem were beyond him, and cast the iron down.

"Nice bunch of cattle," he said.

"Hit don't take no perfessional to see that," Drew retorted tartly, for he would have been denser than he was if he had not seen that the man's attitude was inimical.

"My name is McVay," the man said.

The statement had the appearance of simplicity, but George, who had been listening intently and watching narrowly, was sure that the man considered it important. Then McVay must be a personage. George was aware that the law had not yet come to the country, so that the man could not be an official. He had not yet heard of the unofficial officials who had taken the law and its administration into their own hands.

Neither of the Drews acknowledged the statement as an introduction. They only continued to stare.

"Of the vigilantes," McVay added impressively.

"What are them?" Drew asked.

"The vigilance committee is runnin' things hereabouts," McVay said. "One of its chief aims is to prevent cattle stealin'."

His eyes went to the cattle within the corral. Again Drew would have been denser than he was if he had not read that glance. There was accusation in it, casual though it was. Drew was proud, with the terrific pride of the man who has led an insulated, isolated, lonely life. But there was a granite-like quality in him, borrowed perhaps from the ancient hills amid which he had spent his life. He did not explode in a demand to know what the other man meant. He seemed only to draw together till he was very tense; his face hardened; and his blue eyes became chilly. So he waited.

McVay was apparently a hard man himself. It was as if a chilling wave had passed over both him and Drew. McVay's face was mask-like and his eyes gleamed as he looked at Drew now.

"Where'd you git them cows?" he asked.

Young George saw that the situation was deadly. He did not want a killing here; he did not even want strife. He had a profound admiration for his pappy, as the silver-haired man still was to him, and he did not think that McVay could kill him when the rifle was in front of Drew. But he longed as earnestly that his father should do no killing as that he should not be killed. He knew that his pappy would meet McVay's question with another question. Probably he would ask who wanted to know. So George leaned over his saddle.

"Why, I bought them cows," he said. "I stand ready to pay for 'em. Hit ain't unusual for a man to buy cows, is it?"

"How much did you pay for 'em?" McVay demanded.

"Ten dollars a head."

"Includin' that bull?"

"Why, yes."

Well, mirth was rare enough perhaps. McVay looked at the men on either side of him. The men on either side of him looked at him. They laughed and laughed. Young George flushed and then he went very still in his saddle. A man from the Tennessee mountains was not a merry creature at best. If he was not saturnine, he was at least dignified. George was insulted by the other men's explosion of mirth.

McVay sobered. He seemed to have a faculty of going from coarse laughter to malignity.

"Who'd you buy 'em from?" he demanded.

"Why, from Helseth."

"Helseth owned 'em for a fact. Well, boy, you done a good piece of business when you bought for ten dollars a bull that cost Helseth near two hundred."

"Two hundred?" George gasped. "Two hundred dollars."

"C'rect! That there is a imported bull.

I dunno where Helseth imported him from, but he ain't no maverick of this man's range. Wouldn't it look to you like there was somethin' strange in all this?"

GEORGE knew that the crisis had come. He had not yet begun to guess what this was all about, but he sensed that he and his father were about to be accused of something. Also these men were about to act. The three who had been standing beside McVay moved away from him. This was a preliminary maneuver. With their eyes on Drew, they walked past him till they came to George's horse. There they stopped and looked up at George. Again he was possessed of that notion that there must be no trouble here. He eyed the men uncertainly. That was enough for them. They passed the horse and stopped beyond it.

"Don't yuh make a move, sonny," one of them said. "We have got yuh covered —plenty."

George did not make a move. For one thing he knew that it was too late to protect himself. For another he hoped to explain matters. He looked at McVay desperately.

"Thar must be su'thin' wrong someplace," he said, reverting in his anxiety to a speech which he had somewhat outgrown. "Hit hain't in natur', I'll allow, fer a man to sell a two-hun'erd-dollar bull for ten dollars, but Helseth said he was always ready to help a young feller to get a start. Tell you how it all come about.

"We had heard that Helseth lived across from this valley. People said—"

"Who told you?" McVay asked. "Who you seen?"

George stiffened slightly in his saddle. There was cold rebuke in the eyes which he held on McVay's face. He went on steadily.

"People said that Helseth was a good cattleman. They said he knew about cattle. When we come to build this corral, we didn't know whether hit should be round or square or what. So I rode over to Helseth's. We talked for quite a while. He seemed an agreeable man. When I was leavin' he asked me where I was goin' to get my cattle to start. When I said I didn't know, he told me to come and see him. I went over there yesterday mornin'. He met me about three miles this side of his place. You know how cattle feeds, don't you, McVay?"

"Whaddye mean?" McVay, open-mouthed, asked.

"In bunches, you know," George went on. "Helseth asked me to ride with him, an' pretty soon we come on a bunch of cattle—this bunch that is in the corral. Helseth said he would sell 'em to me for ten dollars a head. I took him up. I said I didn't have no money with me, and he said I could bring hit over. So he started the cattle for me after we had gone around them together an' I brought them here. We held them at the north end of the valley last night an' drove 'em here this mornin'."

"Helseth tells a different story," McVay stated.

"I don't see how that can be," the youngster said.

"Aw, hell, there is too much talk here," one of the men behind George cried.

"What're you drivin' at, McVay?" Drew put in.

"Why, fella, I ain't drivin' at nothin'," McVay retorted. "It ain't my way. When I got a thing to say, I say it. Mebbe you don't know who Helseth is. Lemme go back a little. This yere country is ideel for stealin' cattle. There is hills and valleys that nobody has yet been over or through, hell on'y knows what hideouts. The cattlemen has been losin' cows right along. There wasn't nobody to do nothin' about it. Helseth is a public-spirited man an' allus has been. He called a meetin' an' organized the vigilance committee. He is the head an' front of it. Now, he is a liberal man, but he ain't liberal enough to sell for ten dollars a bull that cost him nigh two hundred. Why, man, that is the best bull in Helseth's herd! Look at him. Look at the shoulders an' the back on him. Look how he carries himself. Anybody could see he had blood in him. Ten dollars would be too cheap for them cows, but for that bull it's ridic'lous."

"What does hit all mean, then?" Drew asked.

"On'y thing I know is that Helseth sent a rider to me this mornin' at daylight to say he was missin' this bunch of cows," McVay said. "More stealin', he reckoned."

"Do you mean to say that me an' my boy stole them cattle?" Drew demanded.

"I on'y know that Helseth sent word to

me an' that we trailed the cattle here," McVay retorted.

George saw that granite-like stillness come to his father. He knew what it meant. His father was prepared to fight, outnumbered though he and George were. But there must be no fight! That was the thought uppermost in George's mind.

"Do you think we would have the cattle out in the open like this if we had stole 'em?" George asked.

"I am lookin' at the fac's," said McVay.

"You accuse us of bein' cattle thieves?" Drew demanded.

"Why, if you want it in a mouthful, that's it."

Drew's hand went for his rifle. The rifle was lifted for perhaps an inch. George's eyes flashed to McVay. His glance was no faster than McVay's drawing of his gun. There was an explosion. George saw his father stiffen in the saddle. His clutch on the rifle relaxed. He began to sway, only perceptibly at first, and then he swiftly collapsed over the saddle-bow.

"Don't you stir an inch, sonny," said a voice behind George. "There is three guns trained on the back of yore neck."

CHAPTER II

PRISONER

IT WAS perhaps strange, though George did not think it strange, that in his horror one thought lived in his brain. It was like a light glowing through a dark cloud. The thought was that his father had been killed in an unfair fight. If those two men had faced each other, a rifle in the hand of each, McVay and not Drew would now be dead. George felt that there was trickery in what McVay had done. He had somehow taken advantage of Drew. Later George was to understand that McVay had only fought as many Westerners fought, using a swift hand in the manipulation of a six-gun.

The young Tennesseean did not cry out. All his experience, his tradition, was against any exhibition of emotion in this trying moment. The women from whom he was descended had suffered in their illnesses without medical aid. He had seen one ignorant mountaineer dress the wound of another with certain fingers, and he had seen a wounded man bear such rude surgery without flinching. There were years of repression behind George, in himself and in his forebears, but his silence now was not a matter of repression. It simply resulted from the fact that he had no impulse to cry out.

He merely sat in his saddle, his eyes on McVay's face. George's own face was expressionless. Only the eyes glowed. McVay returned his look. He thought George was scared, and that gave him a grim satisfaction. Killing a man was nothing to McVay. He was sure that he could kill George if George, by any act, indicated that he invited death. He would have thought nothing of putting a bullet into the son as he had just put one into the father. On the other hand he could derive a kind of pleasure from noting that George was afraid, as McVay thought, to make a move. McVay had an idea that George was stunned. He would come out of that presently and then he might start something. McVay would keep an eye on him, and he would at the same time deprive him of the power to start anything.

"Come alive, men," he said coolly. "Get the boy's guns and help me with this ol' fella."

George sat in his rock-like silence while the men who had been behind him moved up to him and took his weapons. He sat in rock-like silence while McVay and another man lifted Drew out of the saddle and laid him on the ground.

McVay then looked at George speculatively. Pity was to McVay an unknown emotion. He was no more sorry for George than he would have been for a pup whose mother he had slain. And now George's immobility angered him. Tryin' to show he was hard, was he? McVay'd show him.

"Get down," he ordered.

George dismounted slowly. McVay motioned to two of the men to raise Drew's body.

"Take it into the shack," he ordered; and to George, "Come along, you."

So Drew's body was borne into that little cabin which was to have been the home of George and his father. There was no furniture in the room except what they had made with their own hands, two benches and a rude table. In one corner was a pile of bows, with a blanket over them—their bed.

"Put 'im down there," McVay said.

As the men obeyed he turned to George. "Whatcha want to do with 'im?" he asked.

"I'll bury him," said George in a low voice.

"Suit yourself," said McVay, "but don't lose no time."

There were a new pick and a new shovel in one corner of the room. George stepped over to them, took them up, and went to the door. McVay motioned to two of the men to follow him with the body. Outside George moved off from the corner of the house and came to a clump of trees. The ground here was springy with moisture, and in spite of the demands of the trees, the grass was abundant. George dug through the grass with his pick and in a short time he had shoveled out a grave. He placed his father's body in this and then stood erect, leaning on the handle of the spade.

Looking down at his dead, he realized that he was alone in the world. He had never known that he loved his father. They had never had a quarrel, but there had never been an exchange of affectionate terms between them. They had merely accepted each other. Now George knew he would sorely miss his father's companionship. Yes, he was alone in the world. Back in Tennessee, he had countless aunts, uncles, and cousins, but those did not count. Every mountaineer back there had so many relatives of that kind that they were little more than acquaintances.

And now George's blood asserted itself. He would revenge his father's death. The thought came to him quite naturally. Men like him always revenged such killings as had ended his father's life. Deeds less cruel had started many a mountain feud. In those feuds men went more or less openly about their tasks, but George saw that he could not go about this task openly. He could not stalk up to a mountain cabin looking for his man, a rifle in the crook of his arm.

For one thing he was not free to do anything at all. Therefore he must obtain his freedom. He realized suddenly that his own life was in danger. He had been in this West long enough to learn that thieves were often hanged, and they were hanged more quickly for stealing livestock than for any other form of theft. Stealing a horse, he knew, was a capital offense, but stealing cows, he supposed, might be bad enough. Of course it was all a lie, but then McVay was a liar and a murderer. He would lie George's life away.

All this took but little time. While the thoughts passed through his mind, George had stood looking down at his father's face. At first that face had been stamped with the hue of death, but now it was more natural. Its color had come back, and there was a look of peace on it. George's guards, thinking he was absorbed in a last good-by, had relaxed and were standing apart from him, their eyes on the ground. Violent death did not disturb them much; but there was a solemnity here which they could not wholly escape.

George covered his father's body. Then he turned away from the slight mound, the spade in his hand. The sweat of his emotion and of his toil was on his face. His eyes were haggard. He was in that moment a rather pitiful, forlorn object, for his sorrow was genuine. No less genuine was the anger which began in his stricken heart and spread through his young body. It was not a thin, swift anger which would flash in his face and die out. It was a slowly rising, slowly spreading thing, which suffused all his being, and was, for the moment, as material in his body as his blood was.

JUST then George Drew was afraid of nothing. He knew that he had to face death, but what was death? His father was already dead. If he were fated to join his father in a rude grave, with the earth only for bed and covering, why, he would so join him. He had to strike now for his freedom or else presently be hanged from the limb of a tree. He knew nothing about vigilance committees. He supposed members of those committees were judges and juries, too. He knew what their judgment of him would be. He was already convicted.

Those two men were no more afraid of him than they would have been afraid of a lone wolf howling half a mile away. It never occurred to them that there was a fight left in George. They reckoned, if they reckoned at all, that he had had his lesson. So their guns were holstered, and they even averted their eyes from his face. They might have expected accusation there, sorrowful accusation, and that would be unpleasant. No use in facing unpleasant things if a man could evade them.

George saw that they were off their guard and he knew that this was probably the only opportunity he would have. McVay had been fast in the drawing of his gun, but his movement was comparatively no faster than George's now. George was a tall man, three inches taller than either of these. He was not broad. He had the leanness of his kind. But the muscles along his body were as strong as rawhide and as pliant as calfskin. Those muscles answered commands from his brain as swiftly as light.

He lifted the spade as if he were going to drop it on his shoulder. The first movement was as it should have been. The next was like lightning. Instead of descending to his shoulder, the spade kept on going. It whirled over the shoulder and came down flatly on the head of one of the men. He dropped. George had known that the second man would go for his gun, and George had seen how these men could draw their guns. He had therefore planned just what he should do the instant the spade struck the first man's head. He slid it off the head and sent the blade of it toward the second man. It took him on the chin, splitting the flesh. It threw the man's head back and brought from him a howl of pain. George knew that that howl could be heard in the cabin. He had no time to lose. He struck the man on top of the head and he went down limply, with dropped hands and clutching fingers. George cast down the spade and whipped the man's gun from its holster. He was turning toward the second man when McVay and his companion burst from the door of the cabin.

The scene which greeted them held them transfixed for five precious seconds. They saw their two friends on the ground. They saw George with one gun in his hand, while he stooped to the second man. Then they saw him come erect. Then there was one more instant during which they did not draw. In that instant George swept up his hand. As if that were a signal, McVay snapped out his gun and the other man reached uncertainly for his. George fired. The man made a good target in the bright light. George was a comparative novice in the use of a six-gun, but he could not miss that target. The man plunged down, McVay fired, and for once in his shooting life McVay missed. George snapped his own trigger three times. Two of his bullets buried themselves in the light logs of the cabin. The other tore through McVay's hat. McVay was either frightened or discreet. He darted back through the door.

Economy of effort had been necessary in the building of the cabin, and George and his father had placed no aperture in this front wall of it except the door. There was an opening in the back and one in the far end. George knew that he must evade these. He ran diagonally away from the door, so that McVay could not fire through it without revealing himself. George's flight carried him toward the corral, in front of which the horses, with dragging reins, were standing. His own horse raised its head as he clutched the rein. He held him down while he sent four shots within the door. The sound of the last was still in the air when George vaulted to the saddle. The horse reared and half turned on his hind feet. George dug in his knees and fired two more of his four remaining bullets. He was sure that McVay could not see him and his notion was that McVay would think he was still on foot, shooting to keep McVay from emerging.

George brought the horse all the way around and spurred him. The animal leaped away. The sound of his hoofbeats brought McVay to the door of the cabin, as George could see by glancing over his shoulder. The horse, however, was rangy and strong and he had carried George some distance. McVay wasted no time in a shot. George saw him run awkwardly toward his own horse.

Then George disappeared around the bend in the valley. He had elected to come this way because he was familiar with this stretch in the great depression. He had investigated it in the two weeks in which he and his father had been building the cabin, and he had twice slowly driven the cattle over it. He knew that two miles from here there was a break in the valley wall, through which he could flee to—well, to what he did not know, but to some sort of haven, he was sure.

He had to have time to think, to plan. His flight had been largely instinctive. There was no fear of McVay in it. True, he realized that McVay was an expert gunman and in a duel would probably shoot him. Yet he would have faced McVay if that had been the reasonable thing to do. As he fled now he realized that he had not been thinking of McVay in the back of his mind.

He had been thinking of Helseth!

Queer how thoughts seemed to be in a man's mind dimly and then to emerge plainly. Helseth was now clearly before him. Bluff and hearty he had thought Helseth, so bluff and hearty that the self-contained, retiring youth had been sort of flustered in the man's presence. Helseth had slapped him on the back once, and he had winced inwardly, not from the force of the blow but from a kind of queer resentment of the familiarity. He could not remember that he had ever seen one man slap another on the back.

But Helseth had been friendly. Oh, yes, he had been friendly. And now George saw that that friendliness had been a cloak of deception. Helseth had laid a trap for him in selling him those cattle at what he now saw was a ridiculous price. He remembered the scene distinctly. They had ridden out on the range over which Helseth's cows were flung. Thy had come on this bunch, feeding. There, Helseth had said, was a bunch of cattle which any man might be proud to own. There was blood in 'em. On'y a few of 'em, to be sure, but that blood could be allowed to run through a big herd and it would show itself. Yes, sir! And Helseth had beamed as he had fixed his price.

George's eyes narrowed and his lips grew hard now as he thought of the way Helseth had acted then and what he had later done. He had been a friend and then he had been a deadly enemy. He had given George a lift and then he had planned to drag him down. Well, no, not drag him down. String him up, with a noose about his neck! And now George's father was dead. Well, he would kill Helseth. That, he saw, was the reason why he had not tarried to give battle to McVay. McVay's turn would come later on. He was a snake to be scotched. Helseth was a man to be brought to an accounting and then to be slain.

That code, with young George Drew, had the merit of simplicity and of age. It had never been reduced to writing. Indeed he had never heard it formulated in words. Yet it was a living thing. It lived in his blood.

EVEN as all this passed through his mind, he was aware of externals. He knew that McVay had pounded down to the bend in the valley and had turned it, straightening out behind him. He knew that McVay was hotly pursuing him, scornful of him, though he had overcome three of McVay's men. McVay might take a shot or two at him. But he was quite sure that McVay would not hit him, master of the gun though McVay was.

For it was surely written in the book of life and death that George Drew and this Helseth should meet face to face. There had been such meetings in the mountains of Tennessee. There should be such a meeting here in this wider land.

So George sped on. McVay presently fired. He was too far away. He must have known that and he must have fired in furious anger. George could imagine his futile bullets as droning to the earth and lying there.

The passage through the wall of the valley was near now, but George did not slacken his speed. He had learned his horsemanship in the wilds of his native state or along its roads of red clay, hard as rock or thick with mud according to the season. He could handle a horse superbly on this grassy floor.

He came to the break almost at top speed. Behind him he could hear the pounding of McVay's horse. George pulled his horse down and in the same movement swung him toward the break. The horse slid frontways and then sideways till it was almost on its belly, but it swiftly picked itself up and made the opening.

George could imagine McVay thrust over the bow of his saddle, his face set, his eyes gleaming. McVay fired twice, but the break in the wall safely took George. Then he was aware that the pounding of McVay's horse quickly ceased. So McVay was at least cautious. Fear indeed might have come to him. His idea probably was that George had darted into the opening so that he might ambush his pursuer. Again George could imagine McVay. He would be sitting back there on his hard-breathing horse, his hand on the butt of his gun, his eyes aflame with disappointed lust to slay.

The pass through the wall was carpeted with grass, which had grown and fallen down year after year. Soil overlay the bedrock all through here and the grass was luxuriant even on slight elevations. The floor of the pass sloped up and George sent his horse up this. He was sure that McVay could not hear the sound of his going. There was, at the top of the slope, a level stretch of some twenty feet and then a downward slope. George went down this rapidly and came out on a flat. The grass was not abundant here. The flow of the water from the higher land seemed to be all toward the fertile valley, but the going would not be hard, George was sure.

To his right, he knew, lay Helseth's range and ranch outfit. To the left lay he knew not what. He was not yet ready for his encounter with Helseth. There was no hurry. He had time and time. Too, he had a feeling of relentlessness. He would close in slowly on Helseth. His people had been patient people. They had known how to take their time, because in the slow life of the mountains there had been so much time. He knew how to take his time.

So he turned to his left and rode hard, careless as to whether the sound of his riding reached McVay's ears or not. For a long time he followed the valley wall. This presently sloped down till it flattened out on the plain. Waste land lay ahead of George and afar it was broken by a line of hills. The hills were a brownish green, and beyond them were, at first, squat mountains and, then, majestic peaks.

Though George had lived amid mountains all his life, he did not know how deceptive as to distance they were. He had lived among mountains. They had always been close. These mountains did not seem far. Behind him there was no pursuit. McVay had either waited too long or else he had gone back for help.

So George headed toward the hills beyond which the mountains lay. In those hills and mountains he would be secure. He would have time to plan. He had no sense of loneliness, of friendlessness. It did not occur to him that Helseth would be able to rouse an enraged countryside against him.

And somewhere in those hills and mountains was a certain man whom George was even now planning to meet.

CHAPTER III

A FRIEND

GEORGE was hungry and thirsty when he came to the foothills, though he was not especially tired. There was a great deal of endurance in his lean body. The foothills had been further away than he had thought. They had lain squat in the sunlight, and sometimes he had thought he had little more distance to cover and then the hills seemed to recede. No exclamation of impatience had broken from his lips, however.

When the hills were definitely before him, about two miles, he believed, judging by the definiteness with which they now outlined themselves, he dismounted and picked up a smooth pebble and put it into his mouth. It created a little flow of saliva and that somewhat eased his thirst. He plodded on, his head bent, to keep the strong sunlight out of his eyes. There was no sound of pursuit behind him, and he had ceased to look around. Presently he was aware of a change ahead of him. He looked up. The hills were now within a few minutes' ride and that change in the landscape had been caused by the shadow which they cast down as they slightly intercepted the sunlight. He hurried his horse forward and dismounted in the grateful shade. He looked back over the way he had come. It was only sand and sage, and he could see for a long distance. No horseman was in sight.

He stood for a moment beside his horse, taking stock of his situation. The net result of his encounter with McVay had been that his father had been killed and that he had killed a man, for he had no doubt that the man into whom he had put his bullet was dead. The two whom he had struck down were probably recovered by now, sore though their heads would be. His father was secure in his lonely grave. McVay's two men he did not consider. That left McVay. He could vision McVay as turning back from the pursuit when he had been afraid to approach the break in the valley wall. Fear only would have sent him back. There would have been no abatement of his passion.

McVay was a liar. Helseth was a liar. McVay had been doing Helseth's bidding. Then McVay would hasten to the Helseth ranch and there give a discolored story of what had happened. He would not tell the truth as to how George had escaped from him after he had taken George prisoner. That would make no difference in what would be done, however. Helseth, George supposed, had a number of men working for him. They would probably be as unscrupulous as McVay and as Helseth himself. And they would have on their side what law there was. McVay had said they were vigilantes.

George would have supposed that those had organizations upon which the scattered people could depend. George, however, did not think much of such committees if they were made up of men like Helseth and McVay. They might uphold the unwritten law in some cases, but it seemed as if they used it as a cloak in their own operations.

One big question remained: Why had Helseth sought to trick George, to get him into trouble? George had done nothing to him, so far as he knew, had never spoken to him, had, in fact, never seen him till the morning he had started for his ranch. Why had Helseth sold him those cattle at what George could now see was a ridiculous price and then accused him of having stolen them? Certainly Helseth had been seeking to make trouble for him. But why?

Those "whys" became little leaping things in his mind as George stood there, and he saw that consideration of them didn't get him anywhere. As if they were so many gnats, he brushed his hand across his eyes and shook his head. Let them buzz away. He could bother with them no more. The question of land, the question of cattle, were no questions at all to the young Tennesseean now. Vengeance for the slaying of his father was all that remained.

He glanced back at the foothills. They made a fit setting for a feud. He would know how to carry on a fight amid hills and mountains. In them Helseth would never find him. But it would not be enough to elude Helseth's pursuit. When that had died out, he would have to emerge and give battle to Helseth on his own account. That would carry him out on the flats where Helseth's cattle ranged. It might carry him into the one-street village, twenty miles from Helseth's ranch. He had not thought so much of those villagers. They seemed a rather boisterous lot. They were saloonkeepers, gamblers, storekeepers, men who worked in the neighboring mines. And there were girls in the dance halls which were part of the saloons. A good deal on their account George had kept out of the saloons.

Well, he must start. He must find water, first thing. His horse as well as himself needed a drink. He took the bridle rein in his hand and started up the little slope which led to the first of the hills. He traversed a narrow passage and the hills at once enclosed him. Ahead of him was another slope, leading up between two low peaks. Its floor was rocky, and the hills themselves were rock and sand. There was no promise of water here.

He climbed the second slope and came to a declivity which led down into another rocky valley, along which he rode some two miles to the base of a ragged line of hills. To his right, perhaps five hundred feet, there was what appeared to be a draw. He headed toward that and came to it in a few minutes. So far as he could discern there had been no sound.

Without stopping his horse he rode to the head of the draw and turned into it. It proved to be as straight as a city street, with sheer walls on each side and a level floor. He looked along it and at once his eyes encountered the rear half of a horse's body. He saw so much of the animal as to make out that it was a beast of burden, probably led by someone who had passed the head of the draw before George had come to the other end. A cask held on with ropes had lain against the horse's near side, and George had a notion that there was a similar cask on the other side. Someone was toting water from its source to a camp.

George's heart leaped. This might be the man he was looking for. If so, he was lucky. If not, he was still somewhat lucky. The man had water. He would undoubtedly share it, and he could not possibly be one of Helseth's men. Still he was unquestionably a lonely man amid the hills, and his first thought would be of his own safety. George had seen what could happen in the neighborhood of a newly established home. This was a far more fitting setting for murder. He knew that he must be cautious.

HE DISMOUNTED and dragged his reins as he had learned to do since he had come to this country. He had bought this horse out here and the animal was well trained. It stood still as George went lightly toward the head of the draw. Still he could hear no sound and he took off his hat and slowly pushed his head out beyond the rocky wall. The horse was going down a slope and the rope hugged the wall of the hills, still sheer here. There was just room enough for the comfortable passage of the horse and the man who led it. George saw at once that the man was well along in years. There was a definite stoop to his shoulders, and below his hat was a thick growth of gray hair. He seemed entirely unaware that he was being watched. The rope with which he led the pack horse was slack in his hand and slack between him and the horse. The animal was following the man but it was making its own way without other guidance from him.

Man and horse were peaceful figures—an aged man leading a horse with two casks of water tied to its back. Such a man, George decided, could hold no menace for him. He stepped into the open and called. The man was old, but he certainly was alert. Age had not dimmed his hearing. He wheeled instantly, shot a glance back at George, and then he stopped and pulled the horse up to him. He stood forward of the animal's right shoulder and was thus effectively protected. George waved a hand in what he thought was a friendly gesture. Friendly gestures apparently meant nothing to this old man. A gun appeared between the two casks and a bullet sped toward George. It passed beyond him and dropped somewhere down the valley.

Even now George could not convince himself that the old man was more than cautious. He could not possibly be George's enemy. He was merely protecting himself. Besides his bullet had seemed to be a kind of question mark. He did not fire again. George inferred that he had sent that one bullet to discover whether George would return it. If he did, George had no doubt that the old man's next bullet would come closer. His eyes seemed to be as keen as his ears. So George took a chance, backing his intuition. He stepped into the open, with his hands stretched as far above his head as he could force them.

The old man promptly came from behind his shelter. With his eyes on George, he advanced up the slope, his gun ready. When he was fifty feet away, he stopped and looked at George intently. George had a feeling that he was not so old as he had superficially seemed. True, he was stooped, but that now seemed to be the stoop of toil and not of years. George could see his face plainly and it was not the withered face of extreme age. The eyes, George had a notion, held gleams.

Apparently satisfied with his scrutiny the man came on. He stopped again when he was fifteen feet from George. George could now see him clearly. Yes, he was an old man, sixty probably, but he was a man who had hardily defied the years. There was a glow in his face and his eyes certainly were as bright as George's own. He was poorly dressed in blue shirt and blue overalls, run-down boots, and a battered, greasy hat.

"You alone?" he asked.

"Except for my horse," George answered. "Hit is in the draw."

"Well, where in hell you f'om?" the man asked. "You a Missouri man?"

"Tennessee," George answered.

"Huh!" said the old man as if Tennessee were a rather indefinite place to him. "What you doin' here?"

"I am lookin' for a man named Bob McCallum," George said.

The old man started, and the hand which held the gun seemed ready to do the bidding of his brain. It fluttered a little, but then it was still.

"An' you think you have found him?" the old man asked.

George had had a notion that he had found the man he had been seeking. He had no description of Bob McCallum. He had only his feeling to guide him, and that feeling was largely based on hope. Yet he was confirmed in his notion by the way the old man had asked his last question.

"You're him, ain't you?" George asked.

"I ain't sayin'. You got anybody up in that draw?"

George did not know how vigilance committees operated. He did not know whether they ever offered a reward for wanted men or not. This old man, Bob

McCallum or someone else, whoever he proved to be, looked poor. A small reward might be a right smart of money to him. Still he was old, and George was young. He had escaped from four men as young almost as himself. He did not think he need be afraid of this man.

"I'm alone," George answered. "I had a fight back yonder with some men. I got away from them after killing one of them. They had killed my father. I need a drink."

"Who was at the head of the party?" the old man asked.

"McVay."

Passion twisted the old man's features. His eyes darkened. His gun came up till it fully covered George.

"If you are a friend of that whelp McVay's," he said, "I will plug you. I'll see if you are tryin' to trick me. Turn around."

George presented his back to the old man. He heard the other come up behind him and poke the gun into that back with no uncertain hand.

"Step along into the draw," the old man said. "Hell, it may be an ambush, but if it is I will get you before anybody gets me. I ain't afraid to take a chance."

GEORGE went back into the draw till they came in sight of his horse. The hot, thirsty animal stood with drooping head.

"Hold your breath," the old man ordered.

George almost held his breath. He was able to be very still when he wished and the man behind him was no less so. They were a silent, motionless pair for half a minute, the old man with his gun in his hand, the young man with his hands in the air.

Suddenly George felt the gun withdrawn. There was the sound of the other's stepping back.

"There ain't nobody here," the old man said. "I cer'nly can't see nobody, and I can't feel nobody. I would feel 'em if they was here. You can turn around."

George turned about. The old man was standing five feet from him. He had holstered his gun and he was peaceably engaged in gnawing a generous chew from a plug of tobacco.

"Tell me your story, all of it," he ordered. "If it is true, I will know it. If it is a lie, I will know that. The ol' gun is jest takin' a rest. She will come to life if I don't like your line of talk. You are from Tennessee or some such ungodly place, an' if so, you can't draw no gun with me. Le's have your story."

George told him everything there was to tell, rapidly, clearly.

"I am Bob McCallum," he said when George had finished. "What was you lookin' for me for?"

"To get a drink," George answered. "I been chewin' stones, an' my horse's tongue is hangin' out. Hit is a hot day."

"Come along," said McCallum. "Bring your horse."

George followed him leading the horse. They left the draw and went down the narrow slope to where McCallum's horse stood. McCallum unfastened a quart basin from the horn of his saddle and filled it by pulling a bung from one of the casks. George drank half a pint and gave the rest to the horse.

"Now," said McCallum as he replaced the basin, "you said you was lookin' for me. How come?"

George could not tell him the truth. He had received his information in a confidence which was sacred to him. However, he thought his lie a white one. It would not harm McCallum. Not for worlds would he have harmed that old man.

"When me an' my pappy first come to the village we stirred around some," he said. "I could feel excitement in the air. You know how that is. Well, it seemed that there had been goin' to be a hanging an' that the man they was goin' to hang had got away."

"You seen the tree, did you?"

"The tree?"

"Yeah, the tree down the gulley beyond the village. They have hanged seven men there up to date, since them vigilantes has been busy. I was to of been the eighth, but they didn't hold me." His eyes narrowed. "Did you hearn how I got away?"

"I didn't," George lied.

"Nor, nobody else," McCallum suddenly chuckled. "An' they will never know. It was as slick a trick as airy man ever played. Well, what you goin' to do now?"

"Kill Helseth an' McVay."

The statement was simply made. There was no hint of bragging in it. It was not violently uttered. George had been no more forcible than if he had said that he was going to eat. McCallum looked at him with renewed interest.

"I think you will," he said. "You got a quiet way, no bluster. Well, boy, there are two of us. I am goin' to kill Helseth an' McVay my own self. Mebbe we can work together. I am your friend."

"I am yours," said George heartily, and he was more McCallum's friend than the old man could guess.

"You folla me," McCallum said.

He went around to the head of his pack horse, took up the rope, and set off down the slope. George followed him, leading his own horse. At the foot of the slope there was a bare, sheer wall. Fifty feet beyond here was a break in the wall. It looked like a passage back to the valley from which George had come, but when they entered it, he saw that it was a semicircular hole in the wall., Two feet above his head there was a ledge. McCallum pointed to it.

"There is a nice li'l cubbyhole at the right of that ledge," he said. "I got a rifle and another gun up there with plenty ammunition. Anybody comin' here to s'prise me would get a s'prise of his own. You want another drink?"

"Choked," George said.

The old man got a tin kettle and half filled it. George dipped a drink from it and gave the rest to the two horses.

"On'y chance I have to take is goin' after water," McCallum said. "I go before daybreak. This mornin' I stopped to look around a little. I thought I was farther from a ranch than I am. Run on a big bunch of cattle over here two miles where the water is. I am goin' to look that outfit over an' make friends there if I can. We got to line up somebody against Helseth an' McVay. Say, sonny, has it figgered itself out for you why Helseth was after you?"

"No," George answered.

"It is damn' funny," McCallum declared. "I know jest why he was after me, but your case is diff'rent. Well, has it struck you as peculiar that Helseth is the head an' front of what law there is?"

"Yes, that is peculiar."

"Hell," McCallum exploded, "that is all a cloak for Helseth. He is the dirtiest scoundrel that ever breathed. What is behind that cloak I don't rightly know, but it would seem that the job of draggin' that cloak off'n him is ours. Are you with me on that, sonny? It will take a couple of men that ain't afraid of nothin'."

"Sure enough?" asked George in his idiom.

McCallum held out his right hand. It was singularly well-shaped and supple for a man of his age.

"We will be carryin' our lives in the holler of our hands," he declared.

"If I had had a chance at Helseth this morning, I would have killed him right now," said George, still in his idiom.

McCallum gave George his hand.

"Shake on it, po'dner," he said.

CHAPTER IV

CLOSING IN

GEORGE and McCallum were silent through the slim meal which McCallum prepared. Then George looked up at the shelf which had afforded McCallum his hiding place. George looked as if he did not want to meet the older man's eyes.

"I've told you all about myself, Mr. McCallum," he said. "Kin I ask you your business?"

"Shore can," McCallum returned. "No secrets between po'dners. I been a prospector all my life. Lots o' men have been content to work for others in the mines. Not me! What diggin' I do I'll do on my own. I have made a little but spent it all. I will make some more."

George knew nothing about prospectors. He did not know that they were always hopeful of a strike till they died.

"You're all alone in the world, like me?" he hazarded.

"I been married," McCallum evaded; and that was all of that, because McCallum went on hastily, "Now, you git you some rest, sonny. I will stand guard. We got to be fresh for tonight. I will call you two hours before sunset and then I will get me three hours or so. Then we will march.

"I tell you: this yere McVay will go back to Helseth. Got there by now mos' likely. McVay will know where you was headed. This yere Tennessee—what kind of country is that?"

"A big valley," said George. "Hills an' mountains where I lived. Red clay country."

"You tol' Helseth where you was from?"

"Yes, he was friendly."

"Then Helseth will know that you was headed for the hills. Each man to his own kind of hidin' place. This place was all right for me, because Helseth didn't know where I went. It ain't no place for you. My first move was to head up the river, but I soon headed down. My trail up was plain. I would defy any man to foller it comin' down. You get your rest, sonny, and leave matters to me."

George had been up before the dawn that morning, and he now had no trouble in falling into a light sleep. When he was roused by a hand on his shoulder, he thought it was his father awakening him. He looked up into McCallum's face, and instantly the recollection of his tragic loss came to him. He saw McCallum start back from him.

"By Gawd," McCallum exclaimed, "you have got the makin's of a killer in you. I ain't never seen a look like that in the face of a young 'un. Boy, I am glad I met you. We will take care of Helseth."

The statement that he was a potential killer bounced off the armor of George's emotions. Certainly he was a killer. He was going to kill Helseth. That was as inevitable as ultimate death itself.

McCallum lay down while George stood guard. Three hours passed. The sun dropped to the mountain peaks, lingered for a moment, and disappeared. There was a red and then a copper glow in the sky, and then the twilight came. Swift darkness followed. George roused McCallum. They ate again, and George mounted.

He saw that McCallum burdened his horse with the water casks and a saddle roll containing blankets and food. He promptly slipped from his horse.

"You ride," he said. "I'll walk and lead your horse."

"I kin walk," McCallum stated. "Men like me is used to walkin'."

"I can walk, too," George said.

McCallum glanced at him. Then he grinned. "You got a mind of your own, sonny," he said. "Glad of it."

He mounted George's horse and set off, and George followed, leading the second horse. Instead of ascending the slope they went down into another rocky valley and proceeded along it. They traveled steadily for what seemed to George a long time. Then the old man stopped the horse and dismounted. He insisted that George ride now.

"How far we got to go?" George asked.

"Not far. Hour mebbe."

They went on in silence. Presently the country changed. The hills were higher, dark against the night sky. There was a kind of freshness in the air. Water, George knew. Soon to his ears came the sound of that water. It was a rushing sound, a trickling sound, a final plashing. Then against a dark height there was a silver fall. George could just make it out. They passed the waterfall and McCallum ordered a halt. George dismounted and McCallum came around his horse with the pack-horse. He led the way into a break in the wall. Under his feet George could feel a carpet of grass. Tenderfoot though he was, he knew that this was a primitive land and that it would be a paradise for cattle.

McCallum removed the casks and the saddle-roll from his horse and slipped off the bridle. George followed his example. They waited a while till the horses had eaten. Then McCallum led them to the pool which the waterfall made. Here he watered them and he and George drank.

"Mount an' foller me," McCallum directed. "We will leave the stuff here."

They rode along the bases of the hills for a quarter of a mile. Then McCallum turned into a pass. They went through it and George saw before him in the night light a broad, level valley. He knew from the darkness of the bottom that it, too, was grass-carpeted.

"See anything?" McCallum asked.

George had become aware that there were bunches all over the floor of the valley. At first they had looked like huge dark stones, but now somehow he became aware that there was life in them.

"Cattle," he said.

"Yeah," McCallum agreed. "Cattle in bunches. Fat, slick cattle. Must be two thousand head tucked away in here. I been up here sev'rul times for water, and I ain't seen airy sign of a human. Must be an outfit hereabouts some place, though.

We will ride an' see if we can find it. Then we will have to make up our minds whether it is friend or foe."

"Hit must be a rich outfit," George said.

"Rich in cows, anyhow," McCallum agreed, "but that don't always mean money."

He started his horse and the two rode along the bases of the hills on this side. Their going was without sound, for the grass was a perfect mat here. The odor of it was strong in their nostrils, and George guessed that there must be a seepage of water beneath it.

The valley to George seemed without end. He thought he and McCallum had been riding for an hour. Then suddenly above the eastern hills the silver moon came up. All along its length the valley was transformed. The dark floor was silvered over. McCallum stopped his horse and George came up to his side and stopped his. They looked back. Those bunches on the floor of the valley came to life. They rose. Some humped themselves. They began to feed. Soon all over the valley there was a slight movement.

"By Gawd," said McCallum, "there ain't no place in the world better for cows than this place. Gosh, how they must put on beef. They don't have to travel none to get grass an' water. Just stand an' eat an' grow fat. Well, le's be on, sonny. I have got an idea that this outfit won't even have heard of Helseth. Looks to me like they have got a little kingdom of their own."

They rode on. George looked back every now and then, entranced by the sight behind him. He had got some figures on the prospective increase in cattle from a small herd over a period of ten years, and he saw what a herd ten years would produce in surroundings like these. He envied the man who was so well fixed.

Presently he became aware that he had not to turn so far to look back. Glancing up at the wall, he discovered that it was turning them in. He called McCallum's attention to this. McCallum nodded.

THEY went on. George saw that they were now traveling in a semicircle, and in half an hour they were headed back toward the cattle. Their way along here was as it had been on the other side. At length they made another semicircular turning and came up on the other side, beyond where they had started. McCallum did not speak till they stopped at their starting point. Then he broke out:

"By gosh, this is a holler that must of been dug out here before time begun. There hain't no way out of it 'cept as we come in. An' nobody lives here. You can't *feel* nobody, can you?"

George knew what he meant by feeling the presence of other humans. George himself had often had that odd sensation. He felt no such sensation now. He felt that that he and McCallum and those browsing cattle were even far from any human habitation. He conveyed that to the old man.

"Eggzac'ly," McCallum agreed. "An' it is all damn funny. I tell you what we will do. We will wait here till daylight. I'm goin' to have a look at them cattle. My s'picions has got a head start on me an' I can't stop 'em."

They rested wide-awake, till the first streaks of dawn came into the sky. Then McCallum instructed George to mount, cautioning him to do everything quietly. Once up, McCallum started to sing a senseless song. Old as he was, his voice was deep and full. He explained to George that the sound of the human voice would reassure the cattle.

"Move out now in a circle," he said. "We will go around the nearest bunch."

The day was coming fast now. As they moved out from the wall, there was a golden hint of the sun in the air. The cattle had already risen and were grazing along more rapidly than they had done in the night. McCallum explained that they were working their way toward water.

Presently their circle brought them to within a few feet of the cattle. George saw that they were fatter than any cattle he had seen even in this abundant country. Each day they had fed to repletion and they had had no more exercise than enough to keep them in condition. They were a contented lot and they paid little attention to the two riders. Followed by George, McCallum went round them. Then the old man rode off in the direction of another moving bunch. In a short time they had circled half a dozen bunches. At a sign from McCallum they rode back to the wall of the valley.

"Sonny," said McCallum, "we are in

the presence of a wholesale mystery. This yere country has been afflicted with cattle thieves for a long time now. You know what we have done? We have stumbled on the headquarters of the danged thieves. You know about brandin' cattle o' course. Well, a man is supposed to be content with one brand. The gent that owns this outfit is a hawg. He has got cattle here with about every livin' brand. He ain't gone to the trouble of blotchin' airy brand. If he bought a cow, he hasn't gone to the trouble of burnin' his own mark on it. My good gosh, but he is a free, easy, an' liberal gent. Why, some of them steers ain't got no brands at all. They have growed up in a most careless manner. There is two year olds and three year olds among 'em. In fact the ages of some of them corresponds to the time this yere cattle stealin' begun. Them was little calves about that time. The poor innercents ain't got no mother an' not much of a father, an' if you asked 'em they couldn't tell what man's whistle they was supposed to foller.

"Sonny, we are made! When we ride into town an' tell our story we will be heroes. Every danged cowman within two hundred miles will slap us on the back an' call us brothers. That little affair that Helseth accused me of will be lost sight of now. I will be able to rejoin——"

He seemed to realize that his exuberance was carrying him too far. He had been about to disclose too much.

"As for that little matter that lays between you an' Helseth, it will be swallowed up, too," he went on. "Huh, you are accused of stealin' mebbe fifteen-twenty head. What's that going to look like against the stealin' of hundreds of head? It will be a day of great rejoicing when we get to town."

He failed to impart to George the enthusiasm which was sweeping him. He noticed this and stopped again. He suddenly eyed George gravely.

"What's the flaw in it?" he asked.

"The stealin' of these cattle ain't nothin' to me," George said. "Hit is a matter that lies between the owners an' the thieves. You are forgettin' that I have got to kill Helseth. What's cattle an' cattle thieves in the light o' that?"

"Yeah, but if you got a standin' with people it'd help some," McCallum tried to point out.

"I don't care what people think or say," George declared. "I am goin' to kill Helseth. McVay, too. Helseth and McVay killed my pappy, though it was McVay that fired the shot."

"Oh, well," McCallum said. "I dunno that I am so eager to hear the crowd roar. This matter can wait. These cows has been here for some time. I expect they will stay here for some time longer. The day of the big clean-up prob'ly ain't arrived. Them cows ain't costin' nobody nothin' for their keep. Whatcha want to do, sonny?"

"Ride toward Helseth's ranch and wait for night," George answered. "Then I will visit Helseth, alone."

"Alone, with me," McCallum corrected. "Don't you make no mistake about me, sonny. I have put a good many years behind me, but I got a leg-holt on a few more."

"We'll see," said George.

THEY rode back to where they had left their few belongings. McCallum said it would not be necessary to take the water casks with them. They would not need them on their journey. They might not need them at all again. Therefore he was burdened only with his light saddle-roll and his rifle.

"We will eat a bite and then set out," he told George.

He knelt before the roll to get out cold meat and bread. George took up the rifle and examined it. He felt more at home with a rifle in his hands. McCallum was more used to a short gun. He was about to ask McCallum to let him have the rifle, but no word left his lips.

On several occasions since they had met both men had strained their hearings for a sound. They had exercised that other mysterious sense in an effort to locate a human. It was as if their senses had been trained to acuteness in a short time. The sound which reached them was certainly one which an ordinary ear would not have picked up, especially since George had been intent on the rifle and McCallum on the roll.

George stood stock still with the rifle in his hands. McCallum still knelt, but he had slowly lifted his head, slowly and carefully as if he feared he might make a sound in doing so. What had reached there was a kind of vibration. It was very slight, with no more force than the faintest of stirrings of air in tall trees. The two men did not stir, and then the vibration became a kind of roll.

McCallum dropped his head and pulled the roll together. He rose with it in his hand and went over to his horse. He retied the roll and took the horse by the rein. George had turned to look at him, and without instruction from McCallum he now went over to his own horse and took hold of its rein. Moving cautiously McCallum led his horse back into the enclosure till he came to a kind of dent in the wall. He drew the horse into this, till it was concealed from anyone who might pass outside. Again George followed his example.

"You can keep the rifle," McCallum said. "I expect you are good with it. Here, you better trade belts with me. The rifle ca'tridges is on the right side."

They exchanged belts. George made sure the rifle was loaded, and McCallum examined his six-gun. Then they stood in silence. The roll was definite now. Even George knew what it was. A good-sized herd was coming this way. And George decided that it was being steadily driven. There was a steadiness, a rhythm about the march.

Presently there were overtones in the general sound. George inferred that the herd was now so near that he could distinguish individual hoofbeats. McCallum waited a few minutes longer.

"Put your head out careful," he said. "Take a good look."

George took off his hat and thrust out his head. For a space there was nothing. Then a single animal came into view. It was a steer and it looked as if it had been driven far. There was a gauntness about it which spoke of recent lack of water and food. Also it had a look of weariness. Its head wagged back and forth as if in protest. Then other cattle came behind it, till a long file of them was passing. George drew back. He whispered to McCallum as to what he had seen.

"Better lemme have a look," McCallum said. "Somebody will be comin' along on a horse in a minute. Mebbe I will know him."

He took George's place and stood like a statue. Presently the sound out in front decreased. George knew that the cattle and probably the following horsemen had passed. For a moment McCallum stood and stared. Then he turned around.

"Three men," he said. "I don't know none of them. What are we goin' to do?"

George had noticed that the old man had a direct, frank gaze when he spoke, but now he averted his eyes. His attention seemed unnecessarily riveted on the gun in his hand. Something in his manner struck George as strange.

"What is it, McCallum?" he asked sharply.

"One of them fellas is a friend of mine," McCallum confessed. "He helped me make my getaway. If it hadn't been for him, I would have been strung up. He is a cattle thief, George, but I can't do nothin' about that. A man has got to stick to his friends, hasn't he?"

"A man has got to stick to his friends," George agreed. "This matter ain't nothin' to us anyhow. We are after Helseth."

For a while the cloud of doubt and perplexity in the old man's face grew. Then it slowly lifted, leaving his face a little blank, very harsh. The lines in it stood out more distinctly.

"Them fellas will have to take a little time to run them cows into the valley," he said. "Then they will prob'ly eat an' smoke for a while. We have got a few minutes. I want to tell you somethin' an' have you figger a little. By Gawd, mebbe there is treachery all along the line here."

CHAPTER V

PO'DNERS

"ME, I had a po'dner," McCallum went on. "He was a feller of about my own age. We had traveled in the mountains together for years. We never made a big strike but we got enough each year to keep us goin'. A month or so ago we made quite a little haul an' we decided to come out. I wanted to see—well, I ain't tol' you, George, but I got a daughter in town. Between you an' me I have spent on her about all I ever made. I got an education for her. I bought her a piano an' she c'n play it.

"Me an' my po'dner started for the outside. We had traveled mebbe five miles when we come to a stream. That ol' po'dner of mine couldn't never pass a stream without lookin' at it. He asked me to stay there a few days. But I had got the notion I wanted to see my daughter. I kept on goin', leavin' him there. I had been home two days when they brung his body in. I was flabbergasted. He had been shot to death—two bullets in him. Well, I took charge and seen that he was buried decent. I didn't know the fellers that brought him in. Two of them they was, an' hard critters. They said they had been travelin' along that stream and had seen my po'dner shot to death. I tried to get a description of the killer but they wouldn't come clean to me. They hedged but I kept after 'em.

"One day I buckled on a gun and went lookin' for them. I knowed they was concealin' something, an' I was goin' to shoot it out of them if I had to. I come on them in Clem Robert's saloon. They had been hangin' out there ever since they had brought my po'dner's body in. They seemed to have a good deal of money.

"I waltzed into that barroom and thrun a gun on 'em. They was quite a few men in the room, but they stood back and seemed inclined to gimme fair play. One of the men was Helseth. He was at the end of the bar about six feet from these two other hombres.

" 'You two fellers,' I said, 'know who killed my po'dner. You been treasurin' that information long enough. I'm aimin' to make you share it with me. How about it?'

"They was sassy, them two. One of them turned and hooked his elbows over the bar rail. The other stood beyond him, his hands down.

" 'You reely want to know, do you?' the first feller asked.

" 'This ain't no horse-play,' I said.

" 'Well, you can have it,' he said. 'You done it your own self.'

"Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather. A man can shoot another man an' get away with it, but when a man shoots his own po'dner it is a gray horse of another color. Well, I just stood there gapin' at that feller. Before I come to half a dozen men had guns on me. One of them was Helseth. He kep' his gun on me, and while them others had me covered, too, he walked up to me an' took my gun. There I was without a weepon, accused of murder. Yeah, an' robbery, too; for them fellers told their story slick, once they seen I was disarmed. They had been travelin' along the stream, like they had said. They had seen me an' my po'dner comin' toward them, though we hadn't seen them. We stopped to water our horses. My po'dner was a little in front of me. I shot him in the back an' stole what gold he had. Then I dusted out of there.

"Helseth butted in then. He asked these fellers why they hadn't told their story before. They said they had thought it was just a fight between two old-timers an' no business of theirs. They hadn't been goin' to say a word, but I had pressed them with a gun on them. Oh, they was virtuous enough. They wanted to know of Helseth what he would have done in sim'lar circumstances.

" 'Why,' said Helseth, 'I reckon I would have done what you boys done.'

"He turned around to me. Well, me an' him had had a run-in previous, an' there was bad feelin' between us. But he was mild enough now. He tol' me I could speak my piece.

" 'Why,' I said, 'it is all a damn lie. Anybody that knows me knows I wouldn't kill my po'dner.'

" 'That all?' Helseth asked.

" 'It ought to be enough,' I said.

"Helseth, bein' the head an' front of the vigilantes, had me kept there in Clem's saloon while he sent half a dozen men to search my house an' yard. They was gone for an hour. When they came back, they had my po'dner's gold. They said they had dug it up behind the house. Helseth didn't overlook nothin'. He asked them how they had come to look in that certain spot. They said they had seen signs that the earth had been disturbed. A effort had been made to wipe out the signs, but some of them remained. Hell, it was a dead open an' shut case as it stood.

"Well, it has been funny about Helseth since he has been the head of that committee. He has had power, a lot of it, but he has seemed kinda bashful about usin' it. He has never made a decision of his own or asked the committee to make a decision, far as I ever heard. When a man is suspected, he has turned the matter over to the populace, as he calls 'em.

"First thing I knowed I was hustled out into the street. Them fellers that had dug up the gold must of dropped a word as they had come along, for there was quite a crowd out in front, men, women, an' some children. Helseth stated the case. He had them two fellers tell their story again.

"You see, I ain't spent a lot of time in the village. When I was in there on two occasions my daughter was away an' I got a snootful of licker. I talk when I am in licker, talk loud, and damn it, they dragged that up against me. Seemed like I had once offered to lick the hull outfit in Clem's place.

"The long an' short of it was that Helseth asked the crowd if I was guilty. There I stood, on the stoop in front of Clem's place, practically a friendless, unknown ol' man, accused of murderin' my po'dner. There was two men who said they had seen me do it. There was the bag of dust in front of Helseth. So the crowd said I was guilty.

"'The punishment?' Helseth asked.

"'Hang 'im to the tree,' the populace yelled.

"There was silence for a minute, and then a man said like he was speakin' ordinary inside a room, it bein' so quiet: 'At three o'clock this afternoon.'

"I KNOWED what that meant. A hangin' is a hangin'. It takes nerve to string a man up, especially an ol' feller. This man wanted time for him and the other men to get a little corned up so they would have plenty courage. I looked out over that crowd, an' I seen women get pale and children hug up to their mothers, grabbin' at their skirts. That tree has been used often enough, and even them children knowed what the sight would be, when my ol' carcass was h'isted.

"The upshot of it was that I found myself in the back room of Clem's place, with a guard at the door. Well, there ain't no mystery about it. That guard was the feller that just rode past out there, drivin' them cattle. I thought the jig was up with me, as the time passed. I knowed the men in the bar was workin' themselves up to the proper spirit. They had been pretty quiet at first, but soon they begun to get noisy. I knowed they would be in a mood to tear me apart before long.

"I had to keep my courage up. Gosh, I was goin' to die like a man if I could. I don't mind tellin' you, sonny, that the cold sweat was runnin' down my spine just the same. I was hot and cold by turns. I don't mind dyin' so much, but a rope around a feller's neck, an' him with no place to rest his feet, ain't so easy goin' as it might be.

"When the racket was at its height the door was opened and my guard slipped into the room. He put his finger on his lips and he shoved a gun into my hand. Then he went to the winder and h'isted it.

"'They ain't a soul in sight,' he said. 'There's a horse behind the s'loon. Slip out an' hop him.'

"Well, I couldn't believe my ears. I grabbed that feller's hand and wrung it. Then I slipped out the winder. It was just like he had said—nobody in sight, horse all ready an' waitin'. I hopped him, and sonny, I did ride. I rode for my life, an' I got away and come up here in the hills."

"What was the trouble you had had with Helseth?" George asked.

"Sonny, you know how to put your finger on the right spot," McCallum exclaimed. "Well, you an' me is po'dners now. I ain't got no other. I ain't goin' to hide nothin' from you, though long ago I made up my mind that if my daughter had any battles to fight I would fight them my own self. Sonny, Helseth had come a-wooin' of my daughter. Y' know, there ain't so many girls in this country. Airy girl could get a man. A girl like my Stella could get fifty. I do' know as I would of objected to Helseth if he had gone about the thing in the right way. He didn't go about it in the right way. When I come home one time, my daughter tol' me about it. Helseth is well fixed an' he had tried to shower presents on my girl. He wanted to buy her a new piano. He wanted to give her a fine horse an' outfit. He wanted her to do this, that, an' the other thing. She said she was puzzled about him.

"Hell, I wasn't puzzled. I know the ways of men. I hunted up Helseth an' tol' him to ride his own range from then on. That was three weeks before I was goin' to be hanged. Why, sonny, what's the matter? What's come over you?"

No mountain feudist, facing his enemy, had ever worn a colder, harsher face than

George Drew wore now. It was a face chiseled out of marble. The color had receded from it, and it looked as if it had been drained of all life. George was staring straight in front of him, and there was no movement even of his long dark lashes.

He did not at once answer McCallum, and McCallum stared at him as if in fascination. The old man did not repeat his question. He only stood there, staring at George. At last George turned to him. When he spoke, his voice was curiously hushed.

"Helseth done all that to you," he said.

"That's what I'm beginnin' to think," McCallum agreed. "Oh, we will kill Helseth, sonny. He tried to have me hung and he had your daddy killed. He owes a big debt. But that ain't the question right now. The question is, what are we goin' to do with that feller that befriended me?"

"Befriended you?" George asked. "He didn't befriend you. Hit was all arranged."

"All arranged?"

"Why, Helseth didn't want to have you hanged. He wouldn't go that far with the pappy of the girl he was tryin' to win. He wanted to make you run away, an' you did run away. Can't you see him goin' to your girl an' sayin', 'Your father has done gone. You better let me take care of you.' He had that fellow set you free."

McCallum turned that over in his mind for a space.

"Why, then," he said slowly, "this feller is workin' for Helseth. He set me free on Helseth's orders. Now we find him drivin' stolen cattle up here where there is already bunches of stolen cattle. What does that make Helseth out to be?"

"It makes Helseth out to be a cattle thief," George answered. "Hit makes him out to be a man that pretends to be the law only to protect himself. Helseth organized a vigilance committee, so nobody else would do hit. He must have known one would be organized, and he wanted to be the first. Then he could do what he pleased and nobody would ever be suspicious of him."

"George, that feller is th' worst scoundrel that ever walked," said McCallum. "He is a thief, a liar, and a murderer. Well, we will get that feller that was my good friend. When we get through with him, he will talk a little bit, perhaps, won't he?"

"You know what to do," George said. "Tell me. I will follow you."

CHAPTER VI

"WE MEET AGAIN"

FOR fifteen minutes George and McCallum had been standing at the mouth of their hiding place. That had been McCallum's arrangement, simplicity itself. The men, he pointed out, would return this way. They would not suspect that anyone was within miles of them. McCallum and George would hold them up and disarm them. After that McCallum would know exactly what to do.

Their vigil was soon rewarded. There was the sound of approaching horses, no more than a *pat-pat* out there. George knew that the horses were coming at a walk. Their riders would be well satisfied with themselves and with their completed task. They would have eaten and smoked. They might have had a few drinks from a bottle. Their senses thus drugged, they would be sleepy. They would not suspect that two alert, armed men were lying in wait for them.

McCallum had arranged a signal which would spell action. He had been standing with his feet close together. When he moved out his right foot, he and George were to step out and cover the three advancing men. The sounds came nearer. Each second George expected the horses to come into view. At last McCallum moved his foot. It was not only a signal, it was a forward step; and it was followed by a longer stride. Then the old man sprang nimbly across the space which the horses would traverse. George came out and halted at the nearer edge of that space. He had the rifle and McCallum had the six-gun. The three riders were gazing down at those weapons before they knew that they were about to be held up. They instantly reined in their horses. No word at first came from them. George, his eyes roving from one face to another, saw the countenance of one brighten with a wintry light. George knew that this was McCallum's friend.

"Why, howdy, ol'-timer," the man cried, and George could tell, from his tone, that he had a few drinks. "Well, by Gawd, we meet again. 'Member me, don't you?"

McCallum said nothing. He merely kept his cold eyes on the man's face. Surprise came into that face, and the man's gaze went to George.

"Howdy, stranger," he said a little lamely.

"Howdy," said the man from Tennessee.

There was no cordiality in the greeting. Resentment replaced the look of surprise in the man's face.

"What in hell—" he began.

"H'ist your hands," McCallum ordered.

The hands of all three went up. They seemed to realize that McCallum would permit no delay. Also there was that dark, lean youth with the rifle. Funny look he had.

"Ride past me, keepin' your hands where they are," McCallum instructed. "Don't lemme hear a whisper out of any of you."

The men filed past him. He went among the horses and took the men's guns.

"Get down," he said.

The men dismounted.

"Ole-timer—" the "friend" began.

"One more word an' I will blow you apart," McCallum threatened. "Line up here. George, step back an' keep the rifle on them."

McCallum went to his "friend's" horse and took down a rope. Without a word he bound one of the men and dropped him on the ground. Then he turned to the other two.

"What's your name?" he asked the friendly one.

"Plant," the man answered promptly.

"I'm goin' to ask you a coupla questions," McCallum said. "You better answer 'em straight or you will be planted deep. What——"

"Just a minute," George interrupted. "Hit would be a good idea, McCallum, if we separated them men and let them tell their stories."

"That is fine," McCallum agreed. "You take one. I will take the other. An', Plant, lissen to me: if your stories don't agree, far as they go, we will string you up."

"Why, you damned ol'—" Plant began.

George raised the rifle till it was pointed between Plant's eyes.

"Go ahead of me," George ordered.

Plant dodged back from that menacing bore, and then he turned and stalked into the enclosure. As George followed him, he heard McCallum begin to question the other man. George halted Plant well out of earshot.

"Your story better be straight, Plant," George said. "Hit will make a right smart of a difference to you. What do you know about the killing of McCallum's pardner?"

"If I tell the truth, then what?" Plant asked.

"If you lie, your story won't match that other man's," George pointed out. "The truth might he'p you. I don't care no more about you than a dead crow."

"Who you after?"

"Helseth."

Plant looked out at McCallum and the other man. The other man seemed to be talking volubly.

"Helseth was after McCallum's girl," Plant said. "He had them two fellas that accused McCallum lay for McCallum's pardner an' plug him. Then he had me help McCallum to get away. He didn't want McCallum killed. He's been tellin' the girl he managed the getaway and is helpin' McCallum now. He thought she would marry him."

"Who have you been stealin' all them cattle for?"

"Helseth, o' course."

George stepped behind Plant and looked toward McCallum. McCallum had apparently finished, too. He had taken a similar position behind the other man, and now he beckoned George to come out. George urged Plant out there. McCallum said the other man knew nothing about the charges against him. He had confessed to the cattle stealing for Helseth. When George told him what Plant had confessed to, the old man's face shone.

"Hop your horses," he said. "We will ride to Helseth's."

CHAPTER VII

AT HELSETH'S

THEY released the man whom McCallum had bound and then set out for Helseth's, McCallum and George behind the three captives. They rode in silence for a while. George was turning the situation over in his mind. He was not nearly so interested in the disclosures about Helseth as McCallum was. He could understand that. McCallum had a daughter. George had nobody—at least so far as he knew. He had had hopes, but that was before he had encountered Helseth's treachery. He had thought he was going to succeed, from a small start. But now success seemed far away. Anyhow he had to kill Helseth and McVay. He had to avenge his father.

One thing he could not understand: why had there been no pursuit of him? He had expected that by now men would be combing these hills, that large number of men whom he had no doubt Helseth could summon to his aid. He communicated his question to McCallum.

"It's plain enough," McCallum said. "Don't you see that Helseth can't afford to send men up here. Once they begun combin' these hills, they would run onto them cattle. They might get Helseth mixed up in the stealin'. At least they would return the cattle to their owners as far as possible and divide up the rest. Helseth would be the loser. So he is lettin' things ride for a while."

"You'd think he would send a few men he could trust," George said.

"Huh, I overlooked that," McCallum said. "We better keep our eyes open."

"Hit is strange that he sent them cattle in here when he knew I was hidin' out someplace in these hills," George said.

"We better find out about that," McCallum said. "You are doin' some tall thinkin', sonny."

He called a halt and rode up alongside Plant's horse.

"How come you brought them cattle in here this mornin'?" he asked. "Wasn't Helseth scared of nothin'?"

"He tol' us what had happened," Plant answered sullenly. "But we had them cattle rounded up and no safe place to take 'em to. Helseth ordered us to bring 'em here, but to keep our eyes open."

"You didn't keep your eyes open," McCallum grinned.

"We thought if we was goin' to meet up with anybody it'd be on our way there," Plant said.

"Where's McVay?" George asked.

"I dunno."

It was a flabby reply. It sounded like a lie to George. He sidled his horse up to Plant's and poked the rifle at the man.

"Where's McVay?" he asked.

"He's in town, I think," Plant corrected himself. "Him an' Helseth had a little bust-up. Helseth wanted McVay and two other men to ride the hills lookin' for you. McVay said he was damned if he would do it. He said you would kill him. He claims you are a killer. He tol' Helseth he could pick your kind. He said you would lay for him and stick a bullet into him."

"McVay figgers things pretty good," said McCallum. "Well, get along."

They came within sight of Helseth's ranch-house in the middle of the forenoon. McCallum called another halt.

"What you goin' to do now, sonny?" McCallum asked.

One thing only checked the native impulse in George. If this had been in his own country and if he had been as alone in the world as he seemed, he would have taken McCallum's rifle in the crook of his arm and have ridden toward the ranch-house. He was not a fatalist. He did not know the meaning of fatalism. But he knew that the way to seek his enemy was to seek him.

But there was that deterring influence. In the two weeks he had been in this country something which had called to all that was good in him had happened to him. Life, which had been barren for him, a thing of simplicity, of living with death possibly not far off, had taken on a new sweetness. Emotions which he had never before experienced had been stirred in him. Now he was opposed by Helseth and a horde of unknown enemies whom Helseth could summon. He was an accused thief. By now he was probably an accused murderer. He did not know whether matters would ever right themselves, but he had a feeling that he ought to be cautious. You never could tell, he dimly felt, how fate would deal the cards. The next one off the top might be an ace of trumps—for himself.

He had little sense of the dramatic, and it simply was not in him to excuse himself. Men of his kind did not explain things. In that he fitted perfectly into his new environment. Therefore he said to McCallum, simply, "I will ride up to that house, takin' Plant with me."

"Now, that is good sense," McCallum agreed. "If he don't do what you tell him to do, blow him apart."

"Come on, Plant," George said.

They rode toward the house from the little height from which they had first caught sight of it. It was the usual outfit, a small, bleak house, outbuildings, three big corrals, a bunkhouse. No one was in sight.

"Who's likely to be there?" George asked.

"I tol' you McVay has gone to town," Plant answered. "He would take a coupla men with him. He don't travel alone. Mebbe Helseth has gone to town, too. He has got a girl in there. The rest of the outfit is prob'ly ridin someplace. That'd leave the cook."

"Who's the cook?"

"An ol'-timer. He won't make no trouble. Say, you don't need to take me down there. If Helseth should be there, he would plug me before he did you. He ain't got no use for a man that'll do what I have done."

"Ride," said George.

Plant rode sullenly, his eyes anxiously on the house. They came alongside it without having seen anyone.

"Get down," George ordered.

PLANT slipped from his saddle and George followed him. In this side of the house there was a door and one window. George urged Plant to the door, keeping to the side of the window. He ordered Plant to knock, and he stood back with his rifle trained on the door. The door was opened by a bent, peering old man with a sack tied about his waist.

"Where's the boss?" Plant asked.

"Went to town."

"Anybody here but you?"

"No."

"Go in," George ordered.

Plant did not hesitate. He seemed to have come to the conclusion that he had better do what George wanted promptly, so that they might get away from here. He stepped toward the door and the cook stepped back. As Plant entered the room, the cook turned to a table and stooped over a pan. All this seemed to be nothing in his old life.

"Where's Helseth's room—the room where he does his business?" George asked.

"Through that door," Plant answered, indicating a door in the corner of the room.

"Go in there."

Plant walked to the door, opened it, and stepped into the other room ahead of George. One object in the room took George's attention. It was an old-fashioned desk stoutly made of oak. There was a drawer in the center of it. George ordered Plant to the front of the room, and then walked to the desk and tried the drawer. It was locked.

"Tell that old man to bring us a tool of some kind," George directed. "Anything that will smash this."

"You are goin' to get yourself in bad, fella," Plant said. "All this here fightin' an' such is reg'lar enough, but you can't go bustin' into a man's private affairs. Nobody would stand for that."

"Do as I tell you," George said.

Plant called to the cook and after much rummaging about in the kitchen the cook found a battered hammer. When he had withdrawn, George smashed the lock on the drawer, splintering the wood away from it. He opened the drawer. Under his hand was a roll of bills. He took it out and laid it on top of the desk. A bundle of papers, tied with string, attracted his attention. He untied the string and ran through the papers. They were memoranda of various kinds, having to do with Helseth's business. George put them aside and came to a neatly folded paper at the bottom of the pack. He opened this.

It meant nothing to him. There was a row of numerals—100, 200, 180, 160, and so on—and opposite each set of numerals were initials. It was a list of something, but of what George did not know. He called Plant to him and asked him for an explanation.

"Why, they're some figgers Helseth has been keepin', I expect," Plant said. "I do' know what they mean. You'll have to ask Helseth."

George bade Plant stand back and he examined the sheet more closely. The writing in the list was all the same. But below the numerals there was a heavy horizontal line, and below that line more figures. That line had not been drawn by the same hand as had written the figures, George was sure, and the lower numerals had not been written by the same hand. They were larger; the hand which had written them had been more used to a pen.

George had been holding his rifle under his left arm. He had of course no means of knowing whether Plant had information about this list, but Plant was the only man he could question just now. He threw the rifle on him.

"Plant," he said coldly, "I am through with you. You can't do no more for me. Them men McCallum has will serve as well as you. You been lyin' to me. Hit is time you told the truth. You can tell me what this list is or you can lay here with a bullet in you while the rest of us go on to town. Suit yourself, but don't lose no time."

Plant flashed his tongue along his lips. George pressed the butt of the rifle against his shoulder, and sent his eye along the barrel. He remembered that McVay had been quoted by Plant as saying George was a killer. It would be well if Plant thought he was a killer.

"Why, it's a tally sheet, yuh damn fool," Plant said hoarsely.

"What's it mean? Quick!"

"I been runnin' most of Helseth's stolen cattle," Plant went on. "I kept a tally, o' course. Day or two ago, Helseth asked me for it. I made out that sheet."

"You didn't add the figures?" George asked.

"No."

"Well, what's it a tally sheet of?"

"All the cattle that are held up there where we come from. As we run 'em in there through the pass, we tallied 'em. Helseth was a fool to leave that sheet where you would find it."

"He didn't think anybody would come lookin' for it," George said. "Only a hill-billy like me would have done it, I suppose."

He folded the sheet and put it into his pocket.

"You see me puttin' this money back in the drawer, Plant," he said. "We will return to McCallum."

They went out to the horses, past the unobservant cook, and returned to McCallum. George showed the list to the old man.

"It is worth it's weight in gold," McCallum declared. "Why, it will turn near every ranchman within a hundred miles against Helseth. We have a case against that feller now. George, we don't need to do no more sneakin' around, except to keep out of the way of Helseth's men. We will ride for the nearest outfit. Feller named O'Conner runs it. His brand is in that list. Some of his cows are up there in that valley. O'Conner will give us help."

George nodded. He felt that his path and McCallum's had diverged. McCallum was accepting safety. George could have none of it yet. His father was in that lonely grave back there. George was still going to kill Helseth.

CHAPTER VIII

AT CLEM'S

GEORGE DREW was approaching the village on a lathered horse. He had ridden for twenty miles at a speed which would have been calculated to break the horse. Toward the end he had felt the animal falter under him, but he had kept him to the pace. Behind him somewhere were more than a score of men, headed by McCallum and O'Conner.

George and McCallum had come to O'Conner's ranch at noon. There had been a delay of two hours to find O'Conner. He had been abroad somewhere and men had ridden out to seek him. When O'Conner had ridden in and had been informed by McCallum of what had happened, there was an hour of what seemed to George idle talk. McCallum and O'Conner took an hour to get down to anything definite.

They had compared notes and O'Conner had found that he had always been suspicious of Helseth. They had gone over the tally sheet. They had had to figure out, all unnecessarily, it seemed to George, to whom the cattle listed on the sheet belonged. Then they had had to decide whom they would summon to make up the posse which O'Conner declared necessary. He explained to George that Helseth had undoubtedly been working on a large scale. Who his friends were no man could guess. But those whose brands were listed on the tally sheet would inevitably immediately be his enemies. The thing to do was to round up those ranchmen and then start for the village. Helseth was there; it was Saturday; and O'Conner had known for a long time that Helseth spent every Saturday night in town.

So presently men began riding off. Some of them had to go as far as thirty miles.

They could not be back till after sunset. That, O'Conner said, would be fine. They would descend on the village at midnight. By then the fastest pace of the night would have been struck. They would locate Helseth, pounce on him before he knew what was going on, and then . . .

O'Conner stopped at that and nodded his head, with narrowed eyes. Why, then, said George to himself, they would take Helseth out and hang him to that tree about which McCallum had spoken? That did not suit the Tennesseean. Feuds did not end in that way. A man fought his own fight, confronted his own enemy.

George therefore began to plan to get away. It looked at first as if he would have to wait till darkness fell. O'Conner, now that the details were being attended to, wanted to talk to George. When they had eaten, he kept him and McCallum at the table while he made George recount his adventures with Helseth and McVay. O'Conner was well-intentioned and sympathetic. As George told of the killing of his father, O'Conner shook his head and clucked. He had to have that part of the story several times.

"Well, I'm forgettin'," he said, as they rose from the table. "There is one man I haven't sent for. That is Jere Biddle. He will never forget it if I leave him out. Young fella, full of speerit. I——"

"Let me go for him," George said; and when O'Conner looked at him and seemed about to say that he had a man to send, George added, "It's hard for me to set still."

"Yeah, I understand that," said O'Conner. "I will tell you just where to go. It's straightaway and on'y seven miles. You can't miss Jere's outfit, and you will be back here as soon as the rest of them."

So George had ridden. He had not ridden to Jere Biddle's, however. He had headed in toward the village, and now he was approaching it. He supposed he would have to account to O'Conner if they ever met again, but that was a small matter.

He now brought his horse to a walk and went slowly forward till the lights in the first house appeared. The village was set in a flat with the hills beyond it. It was only a handful of shabby buildings tossed down there as headquarters for cattlemen and miners and the usual fringe of society that attached itself to these.

Three hundred feet from this house George dismounted and led his horse off the narrow road. More pains than usual seemed to have been taken with this abode. It was surrounded by a fence, and though George could not see them now, a few flowers and none too hardy vegetables grew within the enclosure. George led the horse to the corner of the fence in the rear and tied the animal there. Then, like one who is familiar with his surroundings, he went along the rear of the fence till he came to a gate. He swung this open and went up a path. He did not, however, knock on the kitchen door. He went around to the side and, standing back, looked through a window.

A girl was sitting beside a table, reading a book. She was sitting sideways to the window, so that George viewed her profile. She was a pleasant and comely girl. Thick brown hair waved back from her forehead and down to her ears. There was a glow in her cheeks, and, though he could not see her eyes now, George knew that they were a deep brown; clear, cool eyes, the eyes of youth and health and a steady mind.

The young Tennesseean thought that she was fittingly surrounded. The room was plainly furnished, but everywhere there was the sign of a woman's touch. This was such a home as George had never known. He and his father had been poor housekeepers back there in the Tennessee hills. The shack had been a place to come to and to leave. It was a shelter and no more. Here were comfort and peace and security.

A clean emotion welled up in George's heart, but was quickly replaced by anger. He thought again of Helseth, drinking somewhere, probably at Clem's saloon. He must hasten there. The men back at O'Conner's must have missed him by now, and they would hurry to the village, for McCallum would have guessed what George had done. Those men did not want George to kill Helseth. They wanted to hang him from the historic tree.

With a lingering look at the girl, George slipped away from the window and went out to the straggly street. Down it he could see the lights from the various saloons, these outnumbering the other buildings. The village had been built up mainly on one side of the street. On the side opposite to Clem's there were a few houses, but these were dark now. George crossed over there and went along till he was opposite Clem's.

The usual sounds of revelry by night came from Clem's. A fiddle was being scraped, and feet shuffled. If he had been nearer, George would have heard the sounds of gambling, too, and the clink of glass on glass.

He could see no one outside the saloon and he went across the street and up alongside the building. Looking through a side window, he saw what anyone could see in that kind of place at that hour: men and girls dancing together, tipsy men dancing with each other, men lined up at the bar, men seated about gambling tables.

He was not interested in the general scene, however. He wanted to find Helseth. He found him in a moment, at the end of the bar nearest the door. Helseth stood with his back to the bar, his elbows hooked over the rail. He wore no coat and George could see the butts of his big guns. Two men stood on each side of him. He was talking to them and every now and then he turned from one couple to the other. Occasionally the men laughed. Helseth seemed to be in fine fettle.

GEORGE stood for a moment debating with himself. He had to decide whether he should use the rifle or the gun in the holster. He decided in favor of the gun. He was surer with the rifle but it might prove unwieldly in close quarters. He leaned it against the side of the building and went around to the front door. The street door was ajar. Just beyond it was a pair of swinging doors, closed. George went up to them and stood listening for a moment. His hour had struck. He was conscious of no emotion. He was neither cold nor hot. His pulse was normal. There was no quickening of his breathing. What he was about to do had often been done before by men of his line. It was a thing to be done silently, swiftly.

He leaned forward till his face was to the crack between the two swinging doors. He could get just a glimpse of the interior, but he could not see Helseth. Helseth was too far along the bar toward the front. However, George knew that Helseth, in his present mood, would let little time pass till he ordered a drink, and that was what George was waiting for. Helseth would turn his back to the room while he took the drink.

George did not think there was danger of anyone's leaving the saloon just now. They were having too good a time. Nor was there likely to be an arrival. Clem's and the other saloons now housed all those who were abroad. So he waited without fear of interruption, though he kept an ear cocked for sound of the men who were not far behind him.

"Well, let's wet our whistles."

The voice was Helseth's. George was grateful that Helseth was loud-mouthed, especially when he had had a few drinks. There was no answer to his invitation, but George could imagine the big man turning and the others stepping up to his sides.

George opened the door. Helseth was in the act of lifting his glass. His broad back was to George. George had no intention of shooting him in the back. He was going to send a bullet as close to his black heart as possible. And he was going to let Helseth face him for a moment. He would let Helseth know who was demanding an accounting. He would give Helseth a chance to go for his gun.

There was no recklessness in this. George was as sure he was going to kill Helseth as he could be sure of anything. Helseth had tricked him, had had his father killed, had forced George to kill a man whom George did not know. He was a cattle thief on a large scale. He was, George believed, a menace to the countryside. He richly deserved killing.

George looked at the men who were drinking with Helseth. With a little start he saw that one of those men was McVay. He had both McVay and Helseth in his hands or on his hands—he didn't know which.

The liquor was draining down Helseth's throat. George let him put the glass back on the bar. Then he raised his gun. Those nearest George saw what he was doing. They stopped dancing. They stood rigid. That rigidity was communicated to those beyond them. There was a sudden silence in the room.

"Helseth!"

Helseth must have recognized the voice. One hand was on the bar, having just relinquished the glass. The other hung at Helseth's side. He lifted it and clutched the bar rail.

"Helseth," said George, "turn around."

There were armed men in that room. One of them might easily have shot George down. Those who were friends of Helseth seemed to be having a moment of astonishment. They glanced, after their first instant of stillness, at the windows as if they expected an attack might be made on them from those. The men who were not friends of Helseth were now merely curious. Apparently Helseth was about to be killed or to kill. They kept their eyes on the stripling in front of the swinging doors.

"That you, Drew?" Helseth asked.

"Turn around," George ordered again.

Helseth came around slowly, his hands in the air. That made no difference to George. Of course he would not shoot Helseth while Helseth had his hands up like that, but he could presently make him take his hands down. He continued to look steadily at Helseth, his gun on him. Helseth now turned toward the crowd.

"Men," he said, "you know I have always been for the law. That is why my hands are in the air now. I am upholdin' the law. This man is a gunman, a killer. Ain't that right, McVay?"

"He is a killer," McVay answered.

"Somebody step up here an' take my gun," Helseth said.

A man, keeping his head turned so that he could watch George, moved up and took Helseth's weapon.

"McVay's, too," Helseth ordered.

The man took McVay's gun. Then he stepped back.

"You fellas move along the bar," Helseth ordered the men who had been drinking with him.

They obeyed. Helseth and McVay, unarmed, stood alone. A grin came to Helseth's lips.

"We got a matter to lay before the populace," he said. "The populace will decide it. The committee accuses George Drew of cattle stealin' and of murder. It calls McVay as its first witness. Tell your story, McVay."

George had not been changed from his purpose by what Helseth had said and done. He felt contemptuously that Helseth was making a fool of himself. He had been called upon to fight and he was merely talking. George looked out over the crowd. Here and there he saw a man looking at him curiously. He thought they were not all against him. A cowpuncher winked. A gray-haired man smiled a little thinly.

Well, McVay was talking. George listened while McVay told a distorted story of what had happened. He had been tracing stolen cattle. He had found them in George's possession. George and his father had resisted the posse. McVay had killed the father when the father had tried to draw on him. McVay had given George a chance to bury his father. While George had been doing that, he had attacked two men and had later shot and killed another. That was all that McVay knew.

Helseth talked then. He had been missing cattle like all the rest of the cattlemen had been. He had sent McVay on the prowl. McVay had reported back just as he had reported here. Helseth renewed his charge of cattle stealing and murder against George.

"Huh, it looks to me like the boy stood your outfit on its head, Helseth."

The gray-haired man had spoken. The cowboy who had winked at George nodded soberly. Two other men edged up to the gray-haired man and the puncher. The others fell back from them. That, George thought, was to be the division.

"I have had my say," Helseth declared.

"What you got to say, son?" the gray-haired man asked.

"Hit is a lie. Helseth is a liar. That's all."

"Which may not be far from the mark," said the gray-haired man.

"You are buckin' the committee, Mortimer," Helseth said.

"You an' McVay don't make no committee with me," Mortimer declared. "Hell, I think you framed this boy and are afraid of him now. He don't look like no killer to me. If he was a killer, he would have plugged you. Anyhow you got a personal quarrel on with him. He gives you a chance an' you surrender your gun. That looks like the end of it to me."

He walked slowly over to George and stood beside him. The puncher and the two other men followed him.

"We will put it to a vote," Helseth snarled. "Them that think George Drew guilty of the charges will say 'Aye.' "

"Aye," came a chorus.

"The noes," said Helseth.

"No," said the men around George.

"What will be the penalty?" Helseth asked.

There was no answer to that. The crowd was stricken silent by the sound of hoofbeats. Horsemen were coming and coming fast, and there were many of them. George saw Helseth's face grow white, anxious. His eyes were full of fear. Why, the man was a coward.

The horses arrived out in front. There was the sound of men dismounting. There was the jingle of spurs, and a heavy tread beyond the swinging doors. Mortimer and the others edged back, Mortimer drawing George with him. The doors were pushed apart. McCallum, O'Conner and three other men edged into the room. O'Conner's eyes swept the crowd and then came around to Helseth and McVay at the bar.

"We've come for you, Helseth," O'Conner stated.

Helseth straightened up. He seemed to be trying to fight back his fear.

"Come for me?" he repeated. "Who in hell are you?"

"The new vigilance committee, dooly organized," O'Conner replied. "We are twenty-three in all. The others is outside. Don't make no signal, Helseth. You an' your sidekickers might get us, but our boys would tear you apart." He faced the crowd. "Get back," he ordered. "Make room for the committee."

CHAPTER IX

HAMMER AND SAW

O'CONNER pushed open the doors and the new committee filed in. They were the ranchmen whom O'Conner had summoned and some whom he had picked up on his way to town. They seemed to be fully advised about Helseth, for they lined up, two deep, and faced him. Mortimer and the three other men joined them. There was a moment of hesitation among the others, and then most of them stepped up to the committee. This left seven men lined up against the rear wall, a number of villagers, and a few miners, the latter two groups not interested enough to take sides.

"You men against the wall," McCallum said, "do you want a fight or do you lay your guns on the bar?"

They walked up to the bar, deposited their weapons, and stepped back. Helseth gave them a look of entreaty but they avoided his eyes.

"This committee," said O'Conner, "has been organized because the committee that Helseth has been headin' is a bunch of crooks. We will prove that. First we will take up the case of McCallum. McCallum didn't murder his pardner. We got witnesses to prove that. We will vote on McCallum. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," the committeemen rumbled.

"We will take up the case of George Drew. I'll tell you about that."

He related George's story from the time of the arrival of George and his father till the present moment.

"The son-of-a-gun slipped away from us and come in here lonehanded to have a settlement with Helseth," O'Conner said. "Look at him—not much more'n a boy, but he was game to go up against Helseth. We can prove every word I have tol' you. Is George Drew guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

"We will take up the case of McVay. He is a cattle rustler an' a murderer. He made a false charge against them two Drews. When Drew was ready to fight, McVay killed him. Mebbe it was a fair fight in a way, but McVay is no good on gen'rul principles. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"We will take up the case of Helseth. Hell, men, his case is scandalous. He has stood before us as an upholder of the law. He has been the head an' front of the vigilantes. All the time he has been robbin' us right an' left. I have tol' you about them cattle that McCallum an' Drew discovered. There ain't a man jack of you that ain't got some cattle among them stolen ones. Helseth framed McCallum, because Helseth wanted McCallum's girl. Why he framed George Drew I dunno. The fac's speak for themselves. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"What's to become of them cattle that Drew bought fair an' square from Helseth?" Mortimer asked. "Hell, it don't make no difference what the price was. Them cattle was sold fair an' square."

"George Drew retains them cattle," O'Conner said. "C'rect?"

"C'rect," said the committee.

Helseth and McVay had been staring at the committeemen. McVay now turned his eyes toward the rear of the room.

"Don't try to make a break, McVay," O'Conner warned. "The boys would on'y riddle you."

McVay faced them again.

"Helseth got me into this," he said. "I was workin' for him an' he tempted me. He gimme more money than I ever seen in my life before. He framed McCallum an' Drew. He hired me to help him. He stole all them cattle. His stealin's has been goin' on for a long time. We was gettin' ready for a big drive. I ain't done nothin'. I killed Drew but I done it in self-defense."

"How about it, Helseth?" O'Conner asked.

George had been taking in all this without much interest. To him it all seemed beside the point. Mortimer, near whom he had been standing, had, however, been intensely interested. He had been paying no attention to George. Now therefore George was able to slip away from him. Half a dozen steps carried him to the end of the room, so that he stood alone.

"Look at me, Helseth," he said.

"Now, George—" O'Conner said.

"Let the boy have his say," Mortimer broke in. "These fellas killed his father."

"Yeah," came from half a dozen throats.

Ordinarily George would have been dismayed to be the object of so much attention. Now he did not feel the more than a score of pairs of eyes on him. He had not finished with Helseth. He had to finish with him. There had been too much delay.

"Helseth," said George, "you had my pappy killed. Hit is time me an' you had an accountin'. That's what I come here for. We will shoot hit out. That is the way to settle matters. Thar is too much law in this." He turned to Mortimer, remembering Mortimer's thin smile a while ago. "Give him a gun, will you?" he asked.

Mortimer strode across to the bar. None of the committeemen attempted to stop him. He laid a gun on the bar at Helseth's elbow and then retreated.

"Pick hit up, Helseth," George said in a low voice. "Put hit in your holster. Then we will draw together. If you shoot me, none of these men will shoot you. Pick hit up, Helseth!"

"Pick it up, Helseth," Mortimer said. "Give the boy his chance."

Helseth glanced at the gun. His eyes came back to George. George saw that he was sweating. The hand which he pushed back his hat with was unsteady. His look held for a moment. Then it wavered.

"Yo're a killer," he said bleakly.

"Pick hit up, yo' razor-back hawg," George suddenly flamed.

"Men!" Helseth cried.

George saw him shrink back against the bar, but he made no move toward the gun. George took a sudden, deep breath. In that moment he accommodated himself to the rude law which had been invoked here. He could not kill a man who would not fight back. O'Conner sprang forward, seized George's arm, and drew him back.

"It is the law," McCallum said, coming up to George. "Let it ride."

"By Gawd," said a miner in the back of the room, "the young cock has got a loud crow!"

There was a gale of laughter through the room. George flushed when he saw the committeemen looking at him and grinning. He found himself suddenly one of them. Why, it seemed that he had a whole roomful of friends, whereas a few brief hours ago he had been alone.

"And now," said O'Conner, "what is the punishment to be?"

THESE men could be swept, in high moments, from one emotion to another. They had ridden here to wipe out a couple of cattle thieves. At George's display of spirit and the miner's praise of him, they had laughed. Now they were suddenly grave. The silence in the room was painful. Helseth and McVay leaned back against the bar as if they were suffering from an overwhelming weakness. Suddenly one of the ranchmen straightened up with a scrape of his feet and a jingle of his spurs. The others looked at him.

"The punishment is that they be hanged to the tree," he said.

"Aye," chorused the others.

Four men, as if they had been selected beforehand, moved up to Helseth and McVay. They laid steady hands on them and started very slowly toward the door.

Then Helseth broke.

"For God's sake, men, no!" he cried. "You don't know what—you're doin'. I been a friend to all of you. Don't hang me. Gimme a chance. I will leave the country. You can have all I've got. Men! *Men!*"

His voice rose to a scream; then he wilted and had to be dragged along. McVay seemed to have accepted his fate.

"Stiffen up, yuh pup," he growled.

The men led the two captives through the door. The other committeemen and then the crowd followed. In a moment McCallum and George were alone in the room with the bartenders.

"Let's get out in the air," George said.

They went outside. Helseth and McVay had already been mounted on their horses, which had been tied to the hitching rail. Their hands had been bound behind them. Helseth had somewhat recovered from his fright, and he and McVay sat upright. The other men mounted and they all went slowly down the street, followed by the stragglers on foot. George looked after the disappearing band. He thought of that girl whom he had looked in upon.

"I dunno——"

"Forget about it," said McCallum gravely. "It is the law. It is all the law we got. Helseth and McVay were a pair of scoundrels. We had to be rid of 'em. Lyin', trickery, thievin', murder—they would stoop to anything. You come on to my house. I want you to meet my daughter."

They went down the street. Halfway to McCallum's house they passed a small frame building set back from the street. From it came the sound of a saw. This was followed by the sound of a hammer on nails.

"What's that?" George asked.

"The ol' carpenter is busy makin' boxes," McCallum answered. "He knows what is goin' on."

George was grave as he and McCallum pursued their way. They went to the last house and turned in at it. It was the house into which George had peered earlier in the night. It was the home of that comely girl, McCallum's daughter. George's face brightened. The picture of the saloon which his mind still held was blotted out. He saw only a young girl seated under an evening lamp in a home.

CHAPTER X

"I'LL BE D-DURNED!"

McCALLUM knocked on the door and then opened it. Despite the lateness of the hour, the girl had not yet gone to bed, and she came from the room in which George had seen her. There was no light in this room, and George stood behind McCallum. His heart was beating fast.

"I've waited up every night for you till late," the girl told her father. "Oh, have you cleared yourself?"

"I am all clear," McCallum answered.

They advanced to each other and clung together for a space. George stood with downcast eyes. The young mountain man was not used to a display of emotion such as this. McCallum released himself and still holding his daughter's hand turned about.

"Stella," he said, "I want you to meet a young friend of mine. He has had trouble, too. Been accused by Helseth like I was. He is clear now. He is a good, game young 'un."

George looked up. For a moment he and the girl stared into each other's eyes in the dim light. Then she glanced quickly at her father and a queer smile came to her lips. She walked up to George and held out her hand. He took it and held it for quite a while.

"Well," said McCallum, "le's go in an' set down. I know you are wild to hear the story."

They went into the other room. McCallum sprawled on a worn sofa and the two young people sat opposite each other. McCallum told what there was to tell.

"Those men riding by," said Stella. "They were—"

"On their way to the tree," McCallum said.

"And so your father is dead," Stella said to George. "You are all alone now."

George nodded. He had looked down as if he could not bear to meet her eyes, alight as they were with feeling for him. McCallum seemed not to notice anything. He stretched himself, yawned, and rose, with a sly look at his daughter.

"Stella," he said, "I am goin' to have myself a little drink. As a matter of form I gotta invite George. How aboutcha, George?"

"No, thanks," George said.

McCallum went into the lean-to which formed the kitchen. He was out there for quite a few minutes. The two in the other room appeared to have forgotten him. He came to the door, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, and they did not hear him. McCallum stopped. For a moment he was speechless. When he spoke he seemed unable to move except for his lips.

"Well, I'll be d-durned," he said. "I'll be double d-durned."

George and Stella had been standing with their arms about each other. Stella's face had been lifted and George's lips had been on hers. They stood swiftly apart at McCallum's words.

McCallum looked as if he felt that he ought to rage. Here was a situation calculated to stir an old-timer to conventional wrath. His only daughter in the arms of a man she had met but a few minutes before! And yet she was his daughter. McCallum knew she had a mind and a will of her own. And he had tested George, and George had stood the test. He'd be damned if he could figger it out!

Stella reached out and took George's hand.

"Father," she said, "I have known George all the time he has been here. I met him the first day he was in the village. I liked him. We became well acquainted. I told him about you. He said he was sure you were not guilty. He said my father couldn't be guilty of murder. He promised that as soon as he could he would hunt you up in the hills and help you if he could. He was going to leave the day after McVay shot his father. Helseth and McVay only hastened him. We are going to be married after a while, father."

McCallum was not a man who did things by halves.

"I have got some gold," he said, "and I know where to get more. Oh, I have made a pretty fair strike at last, Stella. My ol' po'dner is dead. I gotta have a new po'dner. Why, George is my po'dner already."

"I couldn't take help like that, Mr. McCallum," George said.

"You could dig some gold out of theseyere hills for yourself if I showed you how," McCallum declared.

"*My* husband is not going to hunt gold," Stella asserted. "I'm not going to have him catch that fever. We are going to raise cattle."

"Have it your own way," said McCallum. "I will get me some more gold and then I will come out to your place to see you. I hope I don't find my only child starvin' to death."

He looked at George speculatively.

"I see why Helseth was so keen to get you," he said. "He seen you an' Stella together. He knowed you was sparkin' her. He laid low for a time and then framed you."

"I didn't tell George who had accused you," Stella said. "I hurried out of the village. I didn't want him and Helseth to meet."

"Oh, you been sweet on him since your first meetin', huh?" McCallum asked.

He toddled into the kitchen. George and Stella turned to each other. The young mountaineer felt something break in him—the long repression of his kind.

"You are plumb pretty, Stella," he said.

"Well, that's your first compliment," she declared.

"When I was away from you I often thought I would kiss you right now if I had you there," he said.

"Why don't you—right now?"

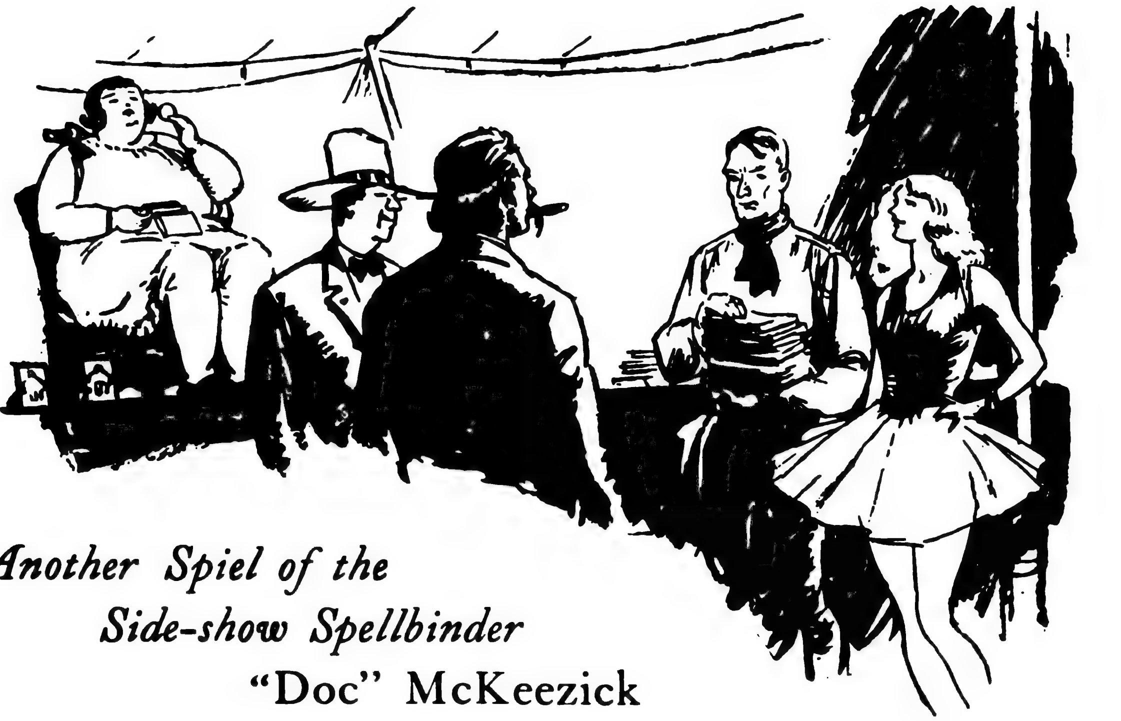
He kissed her.

"You ain't just pretty," he told her. "I reckon you are the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Sure enough?" she queried.

At last the young Tennesseean laughed.

"Gosh," said McCallum, pouring himself a nightcap in the lean-to, "I didn't know George had it in him to laugh like that. He laughs natchurl. This is a fine occasion first an' last, all around, and straight through. Hit deserves to be celebrated with a right smart drink—and will be. By me! By gosh!"



Another Spiel of the Side-show Spellbinder
"Doc" McKeezick

There's Hicks in all Trades

By THOMAS THURSDAY

LISTEN, my children, and you shall hear what every showman should know: Never count your pickin's before they are snatched!

Undoubtlessly, Shakespeare could spin this yarn the bit better than me, but since Bill has persistently refused to answer the phone I'll have to do it myself. I may mix my drinks and metaphors somewhat the weirdly, and stick the right commas after the wrong verbs—but what would you? For those who crave the best, there's always Eddie Guest and the complete works of Elinor Glyn. Meanwhile, take a swig of black coffee—it will help you keep awake.

Well, speaking of asthma—meaning Abe McGill, the Fire-Eater—I wish you could of tuned in on the pretty pasting that he give to me and other members of the side-show. In case you get the notion that I'm either the Fat Girl or the Albino Beauty, I may as well introduce myself, as Lindbergh remarked to Paris. According to what my parents tell me, I'm "Doc" McKeezick, and at the time this assault against good literature opens, I was managing the kid-show with Ike Sullivan's *Wild West Rodeo and Freak Hippodrome.*

We was playing a hair-pants-and-sagebrush slab in dear old Montana, with the appetizing name of Bears' Canyon, when Abe McGill took a complete set of fits and switched his asthma into high gear. It seems that some cowboy in the audience had snitched one of Abe's classic ten-cent booklets, yclept "How to Become a Fire-Eater in Ten Easy Lessons," and when he discovers the daring theft he went up in the air like a toy balloon in a hurricane. It took less than nothing to start this gil raving, but you can't expect a beezark with asthma to keep smiling forever.

"Hey, Doc!" he yelps. "Did you lamp any of these clowns pluckin' one of my books? No fooling, I had six hundred and ninety-two, and now I only got six hundred and ninety-one. I bet this whole burg's crooked!"

"So's your nose," remarks Side-Trap Simpkins, my inside lecturer. Side-Trap was a wow, himself, and gained his sobriquet from the fact that he made his speeches out of the side of his mouth. "You should be tickled silly that one of the punchers took one of them trick pamphlets away. Maybe he might read it."

"Shut up!" snorts Abe. "I wrote that book myself, right out of my own head. *You* couldn't write home to mother. For all I know you crooked the book yourself!"

"The paper would of been okay," says Side-Trap, "if you hadn't written on it. Stop squarking and act like a human being!"

"Shut up!" repeats Abe. "This whole town is crooked and I can prove it!"

Several other members of the show stroll up, including Chief Rain-In-the-Pan, Baby Bessie, the One-Ton Girl, and Lord Leano, the Georgia Hairpin.

"Urgh!" grunts the chief, a full-blooded Mohawk, named Pete O'Sullivan. "Sick-face boy make heap much racket. Chief no like."

"Lay off that trick lingo!" snaps Abe. "If you're a Injun, I'm Coolidge!"

"What ails the sap?" demands Bessie. "Is his asthma working again?"

"Don't call me no sap!" warns Abe, getting steamed up. "Every time you want a taxi, you gotta hire a Mack truck!"

"Little pale-pan boy musn't fight with pretty Maid-of-the-Flesh," interrupts the chief.

"Can't you forget that cluck talk?" demands Abe. "You ain't spieling to the customers in front of your bead-joint, remembah! Away with that Injun hooey! Your old man and mine used to fight it out in the same corner of Ireland. Be yourself, mick!"

"Don't get too personal!" rasped the chief, dropping the dialect. "I got some Injun blood in my veins, anyways."

"What was the tribe's name—Murphy?" gloops Abe.

THE appearance of Lulu La Belle, the Albino Beauty, prevents a two-man World War between Abe and the chief. Abe was more than partial to Lulu, but at the moment of going to press, as the tailor remarks to the pants, the wedding bells fell out of the belfry. Meanwhile, the chic Lulu was giving Abe a nice pushing around, accepting his knick-knacks, bonbons, silk hosiery, and the like. In return she gave him a pleasant smile. Unfair enough, what?

"What's the trouble, honey-bunch?" asks Lulu, fondling one of Abe's big ears.

"These tramps are annoying me," replies Mons. McGill. "And some skunk has hooked one of my booklets, without leaving a dime deposit."

"That's a load of fla-fla," says the chief. "That guy is always croaking about something. He's a lucky fire-eater, but don't know it. He should ought to be glad that he don't have to work with a set of celluloid teeth."

This wisecrack hands a laugh to all but the genial Abe.

"Well, I ain't no grade-A faker, like you!" snarls Abe. "You tell the suckers that them trinkets you peddle in your joint are genuine Injun goods, made by regular Injuns. Blaah! I bet the tribe that made 'em was named Sears and Roebuck. If I had your nerve, I'd fly across the Atlantic on the back of a bluebird!"

"You're all covered with dew," fires back the chief. "Just because you miss a little pamphlet, you growl like a whole family of wolfhounds. I bet you ain't lost one, anyways!"

"I ain't, hey? I sure have, and this whole burg is as crooked as your ears. When the undertaker measures your coffin, he'll have to use a corkscrew to make it fit!"

"Stop picking on my little mans," interrupts Lulu, coming to Abe's defense.

"If he's a man, I'm a ape!" hoots the chief.

"Undoubtlessly," agrees Abe. "How-the-so-ever, I ain't got any more time to waste on half-wits. All I gotta say is this town is crooked!"

"That's a nasty crack," says Side-Trap Simpkins. "Can you prove it?"

"Sure, I can prove it," replies Abe. "No trouble at all."

"How?" chorus the gang.

"Easy," says Abe, climbing down from his exhibition platform. "I'll just put this town to the test. Listen! I'll take five pocketbooks, place a two-buck in each, write the name and address of one of us in every pocketbook, and late tonight, I'll drop 'em around the burg. I'll just write a phone number, and if three out of the five finders call up, you win and I lose. Get the idea?"

"Who supplies the purses and the two bucks in same?" demands Side-Trap.

"Why worry about small details?" whinnies Abe. "You can supply the jack, and the chief can supply the pocketbooks off his stand. They only set him back about one berry a gross, anyways."

"So's your male parent!" yelps the chief. "Them's genuine Navaho beaded purses, and they cost me plenty. What in hell do you supply—your nerve? Besides, them purses was made by real Injuns——"

"Right in their Hoboken factory," interrupts Abe. "Forget the boloney, and get down to business. You guys claim the natives in this drum are honest, and I say they are as crooked as a dime's worth of pretzels. Why don't you back up your statement? If you lose the five purses, you will only be out about thirty-five cents, so what's all the yelping about?"

"Just the moment," I butts in, seeing that the debate was getting nowheres. "Listen, Abe; if the chief will donate the purses for the test, will you put in the money?"

"Who—me?" he squarks, blinking. "Who d'yer take me for—Hank Ford? You guys are saying I'm wrong, so why should I contribute anything? I claim this town is crooked, and I'm willing to prove it!"

"With my purses," moans the chief. "I paid eighty-five cents per piece for them babies, and I can show you the bill."

"Now I'll tell one!" hoots Abe. "Eighty-five cents, hey? Woof! Any time you pay eighty-five cents for anything, except the White House, I would like to see it!"

"Boys, boys—be nice," begs Lulu. "Gentlemen shouldn't fight. I'll tell you what we'll do. Let Abe furnish the money and the chief will supply the purses. Fifty-fifty; see?"

"I'm game," says the chief. "If that dizzy bunion will faint long enough to furnish the money, I'll put up the pocketbooks. Imagine the nerve of a guy saying everybody is crooked—like himself."

"Better not call me no crook!" barks Abe, picking up a chair with the noble object of crowning the chief with it.

"Be nice," pleads Lulu. "Remember that you're regular gentlemen. Now that you have agreed to supply the money and purses, let's make it more interesting."

"How d'yer mean, more interesting?" demands Abe.

"Maybe she'd like to have you drop dead, Abe," says the chief.

"Suppose you two boys make a little side bet between yourselves?" goes on Lulu, with one of her best audience smiles.

"That's a giggle to me!" snorts the chief. "Why, that overripe tomato wouldn't take a chance on betting that Robert E. Lee wasn't buried in Grant's Tomb!"

This stirs up both the ire and the Irish of Abe McGill. To be called a welsher in front of his *amour*—Swedish for lady-love—was the trifle too much.

"I'll bet that flatfoot any amount he names!" blurts Abe, tossing caution to the winds.

The chief digs down in his Injun pants and comes up with a roll that only a greyhound could jump over in two leaps.

"Any amount, hey?" whoops Mons. Chief. "Well, Big Boy, I got five hundred smackers here that's rarin' to go. Want to cover it?"

"I says any amount—up to five bucks," corrects Abe. "Besides, I promised my old father that I would never bet, anyways."

"Sauce from the apple!" snaps the chief. "You prob'bly promised your old man that you wouldn't bet—unless you found a guy who wanted to bet you they wasn't any chinks in China. You're yellow, what I mean. Put a pair of wings on you and you'd look like a canary."

"I'll make it ten!" bellers Abe, with the greatest of recklessness.

Well, as the patient remarked to the amazed quack, Abe and the chief put up ten bones per each, and Lulu promptly appoints herself the official holder of the stakes.

"You understand the conditions, now, everybody?" asks the chief. "I don't want this turtle to try to crawl out of it later."

"The conditions are so simple that even you can understand them," says Abe. "I will scatter the five purses around the town, late tonight, and if only three out of the five call up and report that they have found 'em, you win. If only two out of the five call up, I win."

"Okay," says the chief, and that was all settled.

IN EACH purse was a card, asking the finder to phone the clerk at the Hotel Rio Del Cactus. The jovial clerk, known to the world as "Sleepy Sam," was informed of the bet and was asked to keep awake—if at all convenient. His chief duty seemed to be snoring on the desk in the daytime and shooting craps in the night-time at Canfield Hall, a burlesque on the original of the same name.

Abe was supposed to drop the purses around the town after the show that night, and if the finders did not call Sleepy Sam up to high noon the following day, Abe won the loot. Of course, he took a chance of losing the jack he deposited in the purses, but since the chief also stood a chance of losing his five purses, what did Abe care? Anything to annoy the chief!

After the show that night, me and the boys wanders back to the hotel for a snooze, which same troupers always need —don't think they don't! Abe never stopped at hotels, claiming the atmosphere wasn't so good—with so many showmen around. He slept in his berth in one of the show-train Pullmans, and enjoyed a good night's rest. Considering what the shrimp saved, why shouldn't he enjoy it?

Me and Side-Trap Simpkins shared a room together at the Rio Del Cactus, and retired as soon as we arrived. Not so good!

About 3 A. M.—almost morning—we hear a pounding on the door.

"Tough luck," growls Side-Trap, turning over. "Any time I get a bed halfway comfortable some stew-bum sets the hotel on fire!"

"Who's there?" I bellers.

"It's me, the chief," comes a voice. "Lemme in. I got something on my mind, and I couldn't sleep."

"Tie that!" moans Side-Trap. "The sap has something on what passes for his mind and can't sleep. He comes around here, and now *we* can't sleep. *O solo mio!*"

I hop out of bed, land on a tack—naturally—and open the door.

"What and the hell—" I begins.

"Listen," pants the chief. "I been doing some heavy thinking about Abe. Suppose he drops 'em purses around some ranch-house, hey?"

"That's one for the book!" cackles Side-Trap. "What of it? D'yer expect the chump to drop the pocketbooks under each street lamp? If you ask me, I bet Honest Abe drops 'em purses in the river!"

"That's just what I been thinking!" ejaculated the chieftain. "Well, let 'im do it. My papa never raised no dumbbell children, either. I got a scheme to beat that guy at his own game."

"I wish you joy, including the glad tidings," says Side-Trap.

"But you guys will have to help me," goes on the chief. "Listen, and I'll unload you some of the big idea. Seeing that it's doubtful Abe will drop them purses where anybody except ground-hogs and sewer-rats will find 'em, we'll call up the hotel clerk tomorrow, ourselves, and report that we have found 'em. Since we don't have to bring the purses in in person, how about it?"

Sleepy Sam had been instructed to tell the finders that they could keep the purse and the money for their honesty.

"If no one calls up Sleepy Sam by eleven bells," goes on the chief, "Side-Trap will go out and report that he has found one of the purses. Ten minutes later, I will do the same act, and a little after that Doc can go out and make it three. A nifty idea, hey? And what chance has that clerk of knowing the difference? Besides, I give him a quart of white mule a moment ago, and he won't be right for two days!"

"Kid," says Side-Trap, "you're the bit too good for the show business. You should be sawing iron bars at dear old Sing Sing!"

"Just the moment," I breaks in. "Your idea is pretty spiffy, but suppose several real hombres call up before we get started with our act?"

"What of it?" replies the chief. "We'll be sitting in the lobby, and if some real gents call up and report, so much the better. Then *we* won't have to do anything but collect that bet!"

As the monkey remarks to the banyan tree, thereby hangs a tail.

Well, to dwarf a tall story, by eleven chimes the next day no one calls up, and this makes the chief a bit uneasy. Sleepy Sam, the dare-devil hotel clerk is taking a siesta on the counter, somewhat assisted by the chief's supply of white mule. Of course, we have not taken the noble clerk into our confidence and informed him that we intended putting a fast one over on Mons. Abe McGill. That would have been foolish, as the cat remarked, promptly after biting into a tin mouse.

"Time's up," whispers the chief. "Let Side-Trap go out and give the phone a play. I'm sure no one else will! We could hang around here until they elected a Republican governor of Georgia, and no one would inform the clerk that they had plucked a purse out of the gutter. I bet Abe has deposited them purses in a canyon."

Side-Trap ducks out, and a few minutes later we hear the phone ringing. Sleepy Sam gives a few extry snores, and rubs his eyes. Finally, he yawns, stretches, and lazily pulls the receiver off the hook.

"Huh?" says the lad. "You found a pocketbook, did yuh? Wal, eat it!"

Bang goes the receiver, and Sleepy Sam resumes his nap.

Side-Trap returns and I go out. It takes me five minutes to wake up Mr. Clerk.

"Yeah," says he over the wire. "Who says it wasn't the Hotel Rio Del Cactus? Huh? Well, how much was in it? Okay—buy yerself a keg of ginger ale. 'By!"

Then the chief goes out and phones in the same dose, making three. When he returns we sit around the lobby for annother hour, but no Abe appears. This causes the chief to do some thinking and hands Side-Trap a laugh.

"Wonder where that ape is?" demands the chief.

"Prob'bly en route to Perth Amboy, New Jersey," says Side-Trap.

"What's he want there?" enquires the chief.

"A place to drop them pocketbooks," grins Side-Trap.

FURTHER worrying is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Mr. Abe McGill, in person. He's the wee trifle unsteady on his pins, and looks like he's well Heinzed, meaning pickled. How-the-so-ever, I knew Abe never quaffed anything stronger than ice-water, and would have refrained from imbibing that, only it was free.

"Sorry to keep you gents waiting," says Abe, with a sickly grin. "I been having a tough time with the asthmy, no fooling."

"And you're having a tough time with your bet!" blurts the chief.

"What about the bet?" demands Abe, pricking up his ears.

"Nothing much—only you lose," beams the chief.

"That's a load of *kanswurst!*" snaps Abe, between a fit of wheezing.

The chief leaps to his feet and shakes a fist under Abe's beak.

"So *that's* the game, hey?" roars Herr Chief. "I had a idea that you'd try to welsh out of it. Well, try and do it, and I'll crown you! Three men have called up and reported to the clerk that they have found the purses. Pay off, you sap!"

"Yeah?" says Abe, cocking his head. "Well, ain't we got fun!"

"D'yer think I'm kidding?" goes on the chief. "Go over to the desk and ask Sleepy Sam!"

"I sure will," obliges Abe, and ambles over to the registry desk. At the time, the clerk was prob'bly dreaming about a magic wand that would turn water into wine, while his snoring was in high gear. Abe taps him gently on the head, but Sleepy Sam goes on with his pleasant slumber.

"Snap out of it!" yelps Abe, after several fruitless taps on the knob. "I crave some information, and I don't mean perhaps!"

More snores, this time assorted.

"Are you dead?" demands Abe.

For reply, Abe received several more snores, via alto and basso.

"I ain't got any more time to waste!" fumes Abe. He picks up the register and bounces it off the innocent skull of the sleeping cutey. This seems to annoy the clerk, and he begins to churn the air with both hands.

"Listen!" bellers Abe. "These tramps claim that three persons calls you up and reports finding them purses. How about it?"

"Huh?" mumbles Sleepy Sam. "Oh, them thar pocketbooks? Wal, I'll tell yer about that later. Feel sorta tired just now. Good-night!"

He collapses over the desk again, and Abe begins to see nine shades of red.

"Tickle his nose, Abe!" suggests Side-Trap.

"I'll tickle 'em!" booms Abe, and he

does. He goes to the cooler, pours out a glassful of ice-water, and fires it down Sleepy Sam's swanlike neck. The genial clerk had as much use for water as a robin has for web feet, and when he found a supply of *aqua pura* playing tag down his back he woke up for the day.

"Now, listen," goes on Abe. "Gimme some service, or I'll cook you!"

"Gosh," says the clerk, "I didn't know you was there. Been waiting long?"

"Only two days," says Abe, a pound of ice on every word. "Meantime, I want to ask you a important question."

"Shoot, pardner, you're faded!"

"Did three guys call you up before high noon to-day and tell you they found three pocketbooks?" asks Abe.

"Yes, sar," retorts Sleepy Sam. "And I told 'em to keep the change, for their honesty."

"There you are," gloops the chief. "Le's see you crawl outa that!"

"He's a cockeyed liar!" yells Abe. "And so are you."

"What?" snarls the chief. "D'yer mean to say you won't pay off?"

"Pay off your Uncle Jake!" fires back Abe.

"Add that up!" yelps the chief. "He hears Sleepy Sam tell him that three persons calls up, and he won't believe it. Somebody loan me a ax!"

"Listen, Abe," I butts in, "what's the idea? The chief won fair and square, didn't he?"

"Hell, no!" snaps Abe. "Why——"

"What d'yer mean, no?" sizzles the Signor Chief, with arson, mayhem and murder in his eyes.

"What do I mean, hey?" sends back Abe. "Listen, you umpchay, and I'll tell you: *I never dropped any pocketbooks in the first place!*"

O tempora O mores!

Likewise—Oh, hell!

Not a sound was heard, except for the chief collapsing that suddenly over a chair.

"You double-crossing bandit!" howls the chief. "And I thought you was a man of honor!"

"Hold your mules," begs Abe. "I *am* honest, but listen. I had such a terrible attack of asthmy when I left you last night I hadda go back to my berth and lay down. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. No kidding, that's the honest truth! So how could I drop any purses, huh? I got 'em all, right here."

"I don't believe you," flares the chief. "Put up your hands, Big Boy—I'm gonna give you a proper pasting!"

As the chief was about to annihilate Abe, the door opens and in trips Lulu La Belle, the Albino Beauty.

"Now, now, boys," she begins, "don't get rough. Er, who won the bet?"

"Nobody," says the chief. "Slip me back my ten. This runt pulls a swift one on me."

"Don't believe him, Lulu," says Abe. "I had the asthmy, and couldn't go out. Ah—er—I'll just take my half of the bet, too."

Without a word, Lulu unwraps a package and displays a dandy new pocketbook.

"I just know you two boys will forgive little Lulu," she says, "but I simply couldn't resist buying it. I saw it in a store window, and it is a genuine Indian beaded bag. I paid twenty dollars for it, and I'll always remember you two boys when I use it."

"Put that in your album!" laughs Side-Trap. "I guess Lulu wins the bet, hey, gents?"

"That's what you get for letting a jane hold the stakes," moans the chief. "Well, seeing that half of the jack was Abe's, I'm satisfied."

"Make it two," says Abe, and starts off on a wheezing fit.

Drop into the show some time!

Part Four

The ROARING TOWNS

A story of the Wild Old Days When Cheyenne Was Young

By

HUGH PENDEXTER

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

In the year 1867 Lee Darby, a veteran of the Confederate Army, comes to Cheyenne, intent upon making his fortune. The frontier is a scene of wild disorders due to the approach of the Union Pacific Railroad.

In this wildest of the roaring railroad towns Darby has fallen in with Fevernager, an old plainsman, and Baltimore, his partner. The Indians had killed Baltimore's parents when he was an infant; and, adopting him, had raised him to manhood more Indian than white in mind and habit. Fevernager invites Darby to join him in the business of hunting buffalo to supply the railroad towns with meat. He hesitates, wishing to engage in something that will yield larger returns.

Darby also meets Allan Gorl, an Eastern capitalist who seeks adventure and new fortunes on the frontier. Darby feels that together he and Gorl could reap big profits. But Gorl, although a business genius, wastes his time and money in drinking and gambling. Gorl himself realizes that it is only his wealth that buys him immunity from the vicious elements of Cheyenne. Gorl consorts with Dollie, a Spanish dance-hall girl, and is amused at her conflicting impulses of affection and avarice.

Chief of the bad element of Cheyenne is Elder Keen, an apostate Mormon, shrewd and quiet, but the most deadly of gun-fighters. Among his satellites are Jack Hays, a noisy braggart, and Whisky Frank, a reputed killer. There is bad blood between Keen's killers, and Fevernager, Baltimore and Darby, but they have not fought.

One evening as Gorl and Darby are entering a dance hall they hear a shot. Rushing in, they find that Whisky Frank has mortally wounded an old prospector named Strawberry Sam, who was so indiscreet as to display a fat pouch of gold. Keen had been attempting, without success, to worm out of Sam the location of his strike. Now as Sam is dying he whispers to Darby, so that none of the killers can hear, the secret that will set the frontier afire, the secret that Darby is to carry to Fevernager, Sam's friend—that "The Black Hills are lousy with gold."

Darby eludes Keen and rides out onto the plains to Fevernager's camp. He gives Sam's last message to the old plainsman but neither he nor Baltimore are eager for gold. Nor will they assist Darby to find the rich strike, believing that a search for it will end in tragedy. So Darby reluctantly settles down to the business of killing and preparing buffalo for the market.

Darby becomes restless and rides into Cheyenne. He has a notion that he can persuade Gorl to organize a gold-seeking expedition to the Black Hills. His hopes are blasted when he meets the Spanish girl and hears that Elder Keen has taken Gorl off to his lair in the hills. The girl begs Darby to rescue Gorl. She fears that Keen will get him to sign away all his wealth, and then kill him. Darby consents to go.

Darby reaches Keen's lair, and knowing that the gun-fighter will never kill him while he holds

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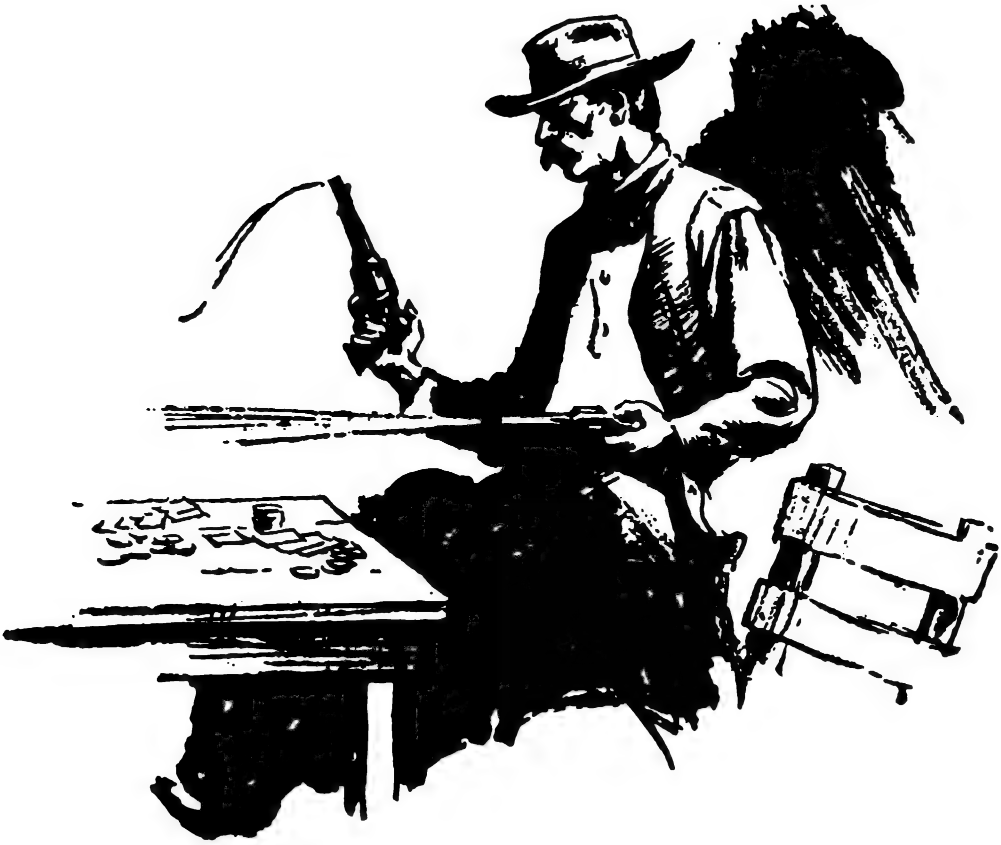


Strawberry Sam's secret, boldly demands that Gorl be allowed to return in safety to Cheyenne. Just as Keen is about to gain the upper hand in this tilt, a squad of soldiers from Fort Russell rides up, and Gorl and Darby are released.

By now Darby is disgusted with Gorl, and giving up all idea of hunting for gold with the Easterner, returns to Fevernager's camp. The next day the three men, Fevernager, Baltimore and Darby, ride into Cheyenne. Keen's men are there and they clash. Baltimore kills Whisky Frank as the badman is about to knife an innocent victim.

In the ensuing scrape Baltimore flees Cheyenne. When later Darby and Fevernager return to camp they find Baltimore waiting for them. He tells them of a dream he has just had in which the Thunder-Birds of the Indians have appeared and told him that he will kill a man who "would be painted red and standing in water." With that Baltimore rides away to seek out a band of Sioux among whom he may go through the *Heyoka kaga*, the Indian rite attendant upon such a dream. Darby and Fevernager ponder over the meaning of this strange dream and prepare to await the return of their young friend.

Gorl comes to Fevernager's camp intent upon learning how to use a revolver so that he may protect himself against Keen. He points out to Darby and Fevernager how they could do a big business by hiring hunters and supplying the U. P. with fresh meat. Gorl offers to organize with Eastern methods and promises big profits. The three make tentative plans for the spring.

On the return to Cheyenne Gorl says that he intends to make money in real estate. His scheme is to claim land in Cheyenne which the U. P. has sold but which has not been surveyed or recorded by the government. Darby and Fevernager refuse to join him, saying that the business is dishonest even if legal.

Gorl again becomes friendly with Keen, and the two plan to go together and jump claims on the railroad's land. In a dispute over the lots they are claiming, Keen kills a man. He then sells for a small cash profit. Gorl, however, plans to hold out for a large profit.

Darby is in low spirits over Gorl. He feels that the Easterner has too many irons in the fire to organize the meat business. Fevernager tells him that in the spring, when Baltimore returns, the three will search for gold in the Black Hills.

Darby and Fevernager run into a young half-breed named Kensler. He shows them some gold nuggets he has found in the Black Hills. Fevernager buys the nuggets and cautions him to hold his tongue and leave Cheyenne immediately.

Later that day Darby and the plainsman meet Keen and Gorl in a saloon. Keen also has some nuggets and says that Kensler has sold them to him and told him where he had found them. Just then there is an uproar outside and the four men rush to the door in time to see Kensler ride by, very drunk. Keen fires at the rider but misses him. Kensler rides away to "tell everyone south of the Platte where nuggets are to be picked up by the handful."

CHAPTER VII

MEN WHO PASSED ON

NOW that the graders were at the creek an avalanche of thieving roughs and desperadoes swamped the town. Men were knocked down and robbed day and night. Quarrels, resulting in killings, were of frequent occurrence as the vicious, newly arrived, found themselves in rivalry with gangs already established. Any municipal regulations as to wearing weapons were ignored. Almost every man went openly armed. Cheyenne was rightly called "the hardest town on the map."

Now it was definitely known just when the rails would reach the outskirts of the town, preparations were completed to celebrate the epochal event. The committee on arrangements borrowed music from Fort Russell and enrolled all of Cheyenne's musicians. The streets and stores were decorated with flags. Almost the entire population turned out to witness the track-layers run off the last irons, with the foreman shouting "Down." Then, amid music and the continuous chorus of cheers, an engine puffed over the last section, and the railroad had come to Cheyenne.

Feasting and drinking and speechmaking further celebrated the day and night. The citizens' committee already had arranged for a general mass-meeting on the morrow, when the first through train from Omaha was scheduled to arrive.

There was but little sleep in Cheyenne that night. Respectable and vicious places of refreshment and entertainment were crowded. Another army of workmen walked the streets and filled the bars, eager to spend their pay.

Darby ventured forth from the Dodge House, which was crowded too densely for anyone to secure rest. Fevernager was somewhere, continuing the celebration that had started in the morning, but the Southerner knew it would be only by accident that he found him. He did come upon Gorl in Headquarters Saloon. Keen, Hays, and Martin and others of their unsavory kind were with him. Gorl's broad face was haggard and showed the need of much sleep. He was loudly announcing plans for several big deals when Keen saw Darby edging away and invited him to join in a drink.

"I had a bit of trouble with some of your friends in this bar a few nights ago," explained Darby with his gaze on Hays and Martin. "I don't believe I'd be welcome. Thanks, just the same."

"Wait, Mr. Darby," sternly insisted Keen. "Any man who makes trouble for you is no friend of mine." Then to his followers, "Any you fellows want to be disagreeable to this gentleman?"

"We'd been drinking," muttered Hays. "At that he brought a fight to us, not we to him."

"If he brought one to you, you needed it," viciously assured Keen. "Join in, Darby. You'll find nothing but civility here, even if I have to open my umbrella."

Darby accepted the invitation, anxious to get Gorl alone and to find a place for him to sleep. Keen's followers were sullenly civil. As Gorl ended one bombastic announcement, John Morgan, known to be one of the country's leading horse-thieves, came through the door and hurriedly forced a passage to Keen's side and attempted to whisper something.

"All friends here, Morgan. Speak up, if you haven't lost your tongue," Keen impatiently directed.

"I'm trying to tell you without telling the whole town that the man you went riding around the country to find is here."

Keen thrust a hand inside the umbrella and rapidly darted his gaze over the smoke-filled room. Morgan quickly amended, "Not right here, but in town. Come in a short time ago. Been laying-up down on Horse Creek."

By this time Hays and the others were anxiously watching the door and impressing Darby with the suspicion they were afraid even while under the protection of Elder Keen. The latter, standing stiffly erect, unbuttoned his coat so he might in an emergency get at the gun in his belt, and harshly demanded:

"How do you know he's come in?"

"Deuce saw him and spoke to him. No mistaking Willie Swager once a man ever see him. Deuce saw him in Julesburg last winter. Knew him there."

All but Gorl and Darby stiffened as the name was given. Martin drew in a long breath and began sidling away. Keen was now composed. His voice was almost gentle as he asked Morgan, "Come in alone?"

"Two fellers with him when he talked with Deuce. But Deuce didn't think they looked much. Didn't think they count."

"Swager don't count much," said Hays.

Keen gave him a quick glance and softly remarked, "You're a clumsy liar, Hays. You know better. You'd rather meet the devil than Willie Swager if he was looking for you. I'm not afraid of Willie Swager. I don't fear any man on this footstool. But he's dangerous. He's more'n that. He's deadly." For Darby's benefit he explained, "Short chunk of a man with a face like a toad's. Pilgrims would put him down as no account."

As he talked he kept swinging his gaze over the room and to the door. He continued his watchfulness while Darby remarked, "Not exactly a friend of yours, I take it, Elder."

Keen smiled grimly and explained, "If Willie Swager 'n' me was the only two men left on earth we'd feel crowded. We'd know there wasn't room for both of us."

"Someone you've had trouble with before?" asked Gorl, just beginning to comprehend the drift of the talk.

"No. If we'd ever had fighting trouble both of us wouldn't be in Cheyenne tonight," smoothly replied the Elder. "Trouble with Willie is he won't be happy till he's got to the top out here and can go after Wild Bill. That's the mark he's aiming for. Hickok's down in Kansas somewhere. He feels he needs a trifle more practice before he goes to Kansas. And he's come here to get it. Blast him!"

The last two words came explosively as the man gave free rein to his rage for part of a minute. He was ashamed of his display and quickly got himself under control.

"See here, Keen," nervously began Gorl. "Mean it's a case of a shoot on sight when you meet him? I'm not anxious to be killed by a bullet going wild."

"It won't be like that," murmured Keen and with his eyes fixed on the door. "And no bullets will go wild, or wide. When we meet up there'll be a play for position."

Darby was watching the long, solemn visage and was amazed to see dots of nervous perspiration on the man's forehead. Keen craned his neck to stare wide-eyed at some newcomers crowding through the doorway, and absent-mindedly repeated, "A play for position. That's the whole bag of tricks."

"The umbrella," murmured Hays.

Keen shook his head. Then he threw some greenbacks on the bar and curtly announced, "Finish the money. I want to be alone for a bit." With that he stalked to the door, one hand inside the umbrella and the other hooked into his belt.

Gorl leaned his back against the bar and inquired, "Who the hell is the man you're talking about? Must be mighty dangerous to make Elder go tiptoeing away when his name's mentioned."

"Got your money on the wrong card," growled Hays. "The Elder ain't scared. But he ain't a fool. Someone's going to die when the two meet. Elder don't plan to have no Willie Swager pick the place and time when they shoot it out. The Elder plans to do the picking. He's got to out-game him."

"If I had my gun lined on Swager and his was in his belt, he'd draw and rub me out before I could cock and yank trigger," solemnly declared Charley Martin.

"And no place ever ran him out?" incredulously asked Darby.

"He was run out of Colorado after folks got good and showed him too many guns. But he's a hellion. He's got it into his head that only the Elder is between him and Wild Bill. He's come to plant the Elder. Then he'll try to climb to the top by doing for Wild Bill. Some think he'll git Hickok, too."

"I'm one who's convinced he won't," said Darby. "Unless he catches Hickok asleep."

"I ain't saying anything till after he meets the Elder," remarked Morgan. "I never even laid eyes on Swager, but the minute the Elder heard he was near town he climbed a hoss and went scouting. That's the Elder's way. When he knows someone is gunning for him he goes scouting. First thing Mister Man knows is the Elder standing in front of him. Never waits for trouble to look him up."

Darby finished his drink and suggested to Gorl, "Walking along with me?"

"Good company, good liquor here," gruffly replied the Easterner. "You always want to go to bed."

"Not much chance of a bed tonight,"

sighed Darby. "I'll trot along and look for Fevernager."

THE noisy night ended. The new day found many of the celebraters sleeping where they had fallen. But there was crowd enough to welcome the train from Omaha. Music, firing of guns, endless cheering greeted the train as it came to a stop. Fevernager was one who viewed the wild rejoicing with a heavy heart. It spelled the end of his day. A new regime had taken over all the country from Crow Creek to the Missouri. He did not cheer as Sidney Dillon, later to be president of the road, and other notables filed from the cars.

Darby remained by the plainsman's side while the reception committee was functioning. He saw Gorl stylishly dressed in clothes he must have brought from the East. The big man carried himself exceedingly well for one who had spent the night in carousing. He was among the first to greet the officials and Dillon was pleased to remember him as a merchant of sterling promise. Among the passengers was the erratic George Francis Train, who was impatient to find a hotel. Gorl graciously offered to escort him to the Dodge House, as the reception committee was leading the way into town for feasting and oratory.

"I'm afraid you'll be dissappointed with your accommodations," warned Gorl as they reached the hotel.

"I'm a philosopher, sir," assured Train. 'When a coconut finds itself in a village of peanuts it must try to adapt itself to its surroundings. A room and a clean bed will satisfy my simple wants."

Gorl was embarrassed as though he were the man's host. Although knowing the scanty accommodations for even the gregarious, he led Train into the small office-bar. It was crowded. Several men were seated along the walls, stertorous in their breathing as they slept off fatigue, or the preceding night's dissipation. The eccentric visitor's gaze widened in disgust as he found it necessary to force his way to the short bar, and at that his advance was made possible largely by Gorl's broad shoulders buffeting a path.

The clerk-and-bartender, two jobs in one, paused in his hurried efforts to satisfy the demands of thirsty patrons. Gorl hesitated for a moment, knowing full well how ridiculous his request would sound to those who had found it impossible to secure more than a place on the floor. Train, impatient and disgusted with the confusion and odors, quickly demanded:

"One room with a comfortable bed." To him this was the irreducible minimum.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the man behind the bar.

"I've told Mr. Train we are somewhat crowded for sleeping quarters just now," hastily spoke up Gorl.

"But a room and a bed?" cried the man. "You mean, friend, you want a room and bed all to yourself?"

"Good Heavens!" impatiently exclaimed Train in a high-pitched voice. "Did you imagine I was proposing to take in lodgers?"

Somewhat nettled by the tone and query, and already overworked, the man peevishly replied, "We ain't got a room and one bed. There's three rows of beds upstairs. They're filled up, sleeping double, and one bed has three in it. But as you're a friend of Mister Gorl's I'll have someone pulled out and you can turn in . . . What's your trouble? Whisky. There you are . . . Right up the stairs, friend . . . Ben, yank someone out of a bed to make room for the pilgrim. Whisky? There you are."

Train clutched Gorl's arm and hoarsely asked, "Does he mean I must sleep with someone tonight?"

"We'll leave your luggage here and by evening I'll find you a place where you can have a bed to yourself," soothed Gorl. "Now we can get something to eat."

"But I wanted the most desirable place. We will go to the best hotel—"

"This is it," shortly interrupted Gorl. "Seemed odd to me when I first came here. But this is Cheyenne. When in Rome, you know."

"No, sir!" exploded Train. "That's one of the most damnable fallacies that ever cursed the human race. When in Rome we should do better than Rome does. We should improve, scatter enlightenment instead of encouraging retrogression."

"My sentiments, sir," crisply assured Gorl. "We'll have good hotels in time."

"And I refuse to wait for time to leisurely bring about living conditions which will permit a gentleman to have the privacy of a bedroom. That is an inherent right."

"Well, well. Let's leave the luggage here behind the bar and join your friends at City Hall, partake of an excellent dinner, and attend to the sleeping arrangements later."

Train was absent-minded as Gorl escorted him to the scene of speeches and feasting. Later in the day he addressed a large gathering and insisted on a suitable hotel. His audience listened as if in a mesmeric trance as he rapidly outlined his proposition of forming a company and proceeding at once with the erection of hostelry that would be a credit to the town. It must be three stories high and one hundred and thirty-two feet long and wide. There was magic in his speech and the project was cheered with mighty enthusiasm. Within six hours after stepping from the train the hotel-company was organized and Gorl was given the contracts for much of the work. There followed more feasting, speechmaking, and drinking.

Darby encountered Gorl as the latter, flushed of face, was striding down Eddy Street after the celebration ended. Gorl clapped a hand on the Southerner's shoulder and began, "Big business, Darby. I'll have to put your meat business through as a side issue. Be a sleeping partner. But this day's work will furnish you with an excellent new market for game. Now I must put through my big contract on the jump. Train is a doer. Never waits for time to be ripe. Goes ahead and forces the ripening. Great man."

"Mighty glad you've taken your proper place," heartily congratulated Darby. "I enjoyed Mr. Train's speech. Seems to be a man of fire. I actually could see the new hotel as he talked. How much has been subscribed?"

Gorl pushed his hat back and rubbed his forehead and slowly replied, "Why, we haven't got around to financing it yet. In fact, no money has been subscribed. But you know this town. You know how we can put things through with a rush. Money'll pour in before we need it. I'm on my way to the bank to make arrangements for an advance on my contracts so I can have my crew ready once we've decided on a lot. As Mr. Train said to me, enthusiasm begets money. Arouse enthusiasm first. Keen man." And with a wave of the hand he hurried away, still under the spell of Train's magnetic personality.

Darby's errand was more prosaic. He would be content with work. Many must be idle in Cheyenne during the winter but he did not propose to be one of them. He sought and found General Casement, one of the greatest of all tracklayers on the continent, and bluntly requested work and told what he believed to be his qualifications.

Casement promptly decided. "I know you'll do. We need in particular a special officer here in Cheyenne to protect our freight from thieves. Until we make this crossing all merchandise beyond Cheyenne must be taken over here by the freighting and forwarding companies. There threatens to be a congestion of freight, waiting to be unloaded. And thieves will be plentiful."

"I should prefer being boss of a crew, but I can't be chooser."

"To boss a construction crew you must know more about the work than the men, or you would get no results. You've been a soldier, a fighting man. You may be required to do some detective work. But start in as watchman. It will be night work, largely."

Darby accepted the offer, and with a winter's work assured, he now turned his attention to locating Fevernager. He found the old plainsman in a tent saloon, kneeling on the back of a man, and apparently about to remove his scalp with a big butcher knife. Ignoring Darby's exclamation of surprise Fevernager reminded:

"Thirty seconds more and I'll strip off yer ha'r if ye don't fork over the money ye stole from me!"

With his head pulled back the man had the utmost difficulty in reaching an inside pocket and producing a big wad of greenbacks. Fevernager grabbed the money and retained his position until he hurriedly counted the bills. "Not just right, but near enough. Few dollers over or under. Don't ever steal my poker winnin's ag'in."

He rose and the thief crawled on his hands and knees to the exit and then leaped erect and ran. Fevernager, amiably drunk, took Darby's arm and said, "Want ye to meet new friend of mine. Derndest feller to keep his ugly trap shet an' jest say things with his eyes ye ever see. We talked for half an hour an' he ain't scurcely said a word. There he stands. Not handsome to look at, but all wool 'n eighteen yards wide."

THE man he pointed out was standing at the end of the bar and to Darby's sober vision appeared most unsavory. He was scarcely five feet in height. His head had the appearance of having been violently compressed. The forehead was low and the space between it and the receding chin was grotesquely limited. The eyes bulged as if about to pop from their sockets and the lips wrinkled close to the flat nose. All Darby could think of at first was a catfish. Although used to the plainsman's drunken vagaries Darby felt a wild inclination to laugh as he stared at the caricature. This was succeeded by a feeling of pity mixed with embarrassment as he realized nature had not been kind to the little man, and that the plainsman's characterization had been heard by everyone in the tent.

The Southerner grew sober and thoughtful as Fevernager drew him to the end of the bar and introduced:

"Willie, ye most silent cuss, want ye to shake with the noblest rebel ever in this country. Darby, my son, this is Willie Swager, best man in the world to steer clear of when ye feel bodaciously like a wolf in need of raw meat."

Darby bowed and found himself clasping a cold hand and trying to appear composed as he met the fixed gaze of the protruding eyes.

In a voice that startled Darby because of its musical quality Swager said, "Like your friend here. Makes me want to laugh. Glad to meet you."

A harsh voice requested, "Make me known to your friend, Fevernager."

Darby wheeled and beheld Elder Keen standing in the entrance of the tent. For once he was not carrying his umbrella, and the long coat was unbuttoned. Behind him stood Jack Hays, Charley Martin and John Morgan.

As he slowly approached, Swager slowly advanced, hitching each leg forward as if the process of walking had to be thought out step by step. Like the Elder he wore a tall hat. Despite his slow and awkward approach there was a feral eagerness in his bulging eyes, and the travesty of a smile stretched his wide mouth grotesquely.

He bowed to Elder Keen and, without offering his hand, greeted, "I'm mortal glad to meet you, sir." The voice was soft and almost languorous. As if nature in neglecting the externals had endeavored to make some amend by perfecting the vocal cords. Had Darby heard him, without seeing, he could have imagined a beautiful woman was speaking.

Keen bowed stiffly and bluntly informed, "I started hunting you up the minute I heard you was in the neighborhood. Even did quite a bit of riding up and down the creek, looking for you at some hoss-ranch. That shows I'm mighty pleased to find you."

"I knew you'd come. I knew you'd come here if I waited," murmured Swager.

"I started the minute a friend said you told him you wanted to meet me."

Swager more than ever reminded Darby of a catfish as he tilted his head to stare up into the long, gloomy face. His voice was sweet as a lullaby as he remarked, "I find Cheyenne crowded, sir."

"It is crowded, Mr. Swager. I, too, feel I'd like more room. Meet my friends." And he rapidly called his followers by name.

Swager surveyed them thoughtfully, his upper lip crawling upward in what might have been a sneer. He bowed his head a bit as each name was called. After the introduction was finished he said, "I have no friends along, unless this honest old plainsman feels friendly."

"I'm backing you, pard, long's your ugly face is over your feet," promptly assured Fevernager.

Jack Hays laughed at this, but the laugh suddenly died away when the staring eyes picked him out. Swager readily admitted, "My face is ugly as my truthful old friend says. I know I lack what most men prize. But my ugliness isn't all loss. It makes dying a bit easier. When I get into trouble it's something of a comfort to know my good looks can't be spoiled."

"I never go by a man's looks," Keen coldly announced. "I go by what he can do. Man out in this country don't build up a reputation by his looks. He's known by his gun-play."

"And we don't count it gun-play if he shoots down women and children, do we?" added Swager.

Keen's face twitched and grew livid at this reminder of the part he was believed to have played in the Mountain Meadow massacre. He slowly replied. "You never spoke a truer word in your life, Swager, than when you said this town is crowded. Scarcely find room to breath. S'pose we liquor." And Elder Keen slowly removed his hat and brushed back his hair. Swager smiled and nodded assent. Both were seeking the initial advantage and he knew Keen did not dare race him to the draw as yet.

The two duellists advanced to the bar side by side, Keen carrying his hat. As they halted at the bar Swager sidled to his old position at the end. Jack Hays and his two companions ranged along on the Elder's right. Keen continued brushing back his hair and deposited his tall hat on the bar. Fevernager for once disregarded the call of whisky and kept back between the rivals and gave his attention to watching Keen and his friends. He was proud of Swager for offering to shoot it out on the spot. He felt contempt for Keen's play for time in suggesting drinks. Satisfied the quarrel was postponed for a bit he shifted his position to stand beside Darby at the upper end of the bar, where he could prevent either of Keen's friends from making a hostile move.

Darby was intensely interested in the drama. From what he had learned of the history of the two men he believed it would be a blessing to Cheyenne if both died in their tracks. But if there was any balance to be struck between the two he favored Swager. This because of the current belief of Keen's part in the Mountain Meadow horror.

Moving his hand very slowly so it could not be suspected he was about to draw a weapon, Keen produced some greenbacks and placed them on the bar.

Darby whispered to Fevernager, "Will it come to a fight, or is one afraid and t'other dassent?"

Fevernager nodded complacently and placed his revolver on the bar and poured a drink with his left hand. This assurance of protection from any attack by Keen's followers caused Swager to smile broadly.

"Where will they go to settle it?" murmured Darby, his eyes never leaving Keen's long face.

"They've arrived. Right here. Fiddling for a chance to go for a gun now. When they begin, duck. Bar's bullet proof."

Swager slowly lifted his glass and gave, "Here's to the best man."

"As to what two men?" barked Keen, halting his glass half way to his lips.

"Hickok and me," gently explained Swager.

Keen smiled grimly and confided, "Do you know, Swager, I had the notion it would be my gun that would wind up that feller's ball of yarn."

The grotesquely wrinkled lips of the little man worked convulsively, and he reminded, "Can't both of us jump him, can we? Besides, he goes armed. You'd find it different than you did down in Utah."

Keen's hand shook for a second, but he was not to be baited into drawing a gun. Already he was realizing Swager had won out in picking the ground. Swager read his mind and laughed silently, then remarked, "You spilled a few drops of good liquor, Elder Keen. As to Hickok, I'm now on my way to Kansas to look him up. Came here to take the steam-cars east. Heard of you, and thought I'd save myself the bother of coming back again just to see you."

Keen was cold again. He replied, "Well, well. If I could tell fortunes by cards I'd say you was booked for a longer trip than running down to Kansas."

"Fortune-tellers mostly are liars. Let's drink to the best man—here."

"Good!" snapped the Elder, and the two right arms rose at the same time and completed the toast.

AS THE empty glasses were lowered Keen rested his elbows on the bar and asked, "Is the game open?"

The bartender rushed the length of the bar, around Swager, and made for the exit.

Swager glared at the four men and countered, "Is this to be a square shooting 'tween two men, or a mob trying to kill one man? I don't want any Mountain Meadow stuff."

Fevernager drew the attention of all by harshly reminding, "If more'n one man tries to jump one man, whatsomever, I shoot most bodacious an' promiscus in a southerly direction." And he stressed his threat by closing his lean old fingers around the handle of the Navy revolver before him.

"That's a very good talk, old man," Swager melodiously approved. "Nothing sweeter'n two men playing their own hands."

Charley Martin glared murderously at the plainsman and announced, "You try any funny business and something will happen."

"If you make a move to draw a gun in this place I'll drill you. That's what will happen," spoke up Darby.

"Young feller, you keep out of this, or I'll cuff your ears," Fevernager told him. "Ain't I in position to rake the whole line if they try any games. Besides, Elder Keen ain't askin' any help from nobody."

Without removing his gaze from Swager's squat face, Keen said, "You are right, old man. I need no help. My friends came with me as I was told Swager had two men with him. You boys keep out of this. You leave the bar."

Swager added, "Leave the place. When I've finished with your boss I'll open on you if you're in this tent."

"Let all quit the place," agreed Keen. "Just you and me alone here." And he brushed back his long hair with his left hand and gripped the edge of the bar with his right.

Swager feared a trap, but Fevernager's watchful attitude reassured him. To face Keen alone was the height of his desire. He nodded approval of the suggestion, and Hays, Martin, and Morgan promptly retreated to the door, slowly followed by Darby and Fevernager. The two killers were alone in that resort. Outside a crowd gathered.

Neither of the men at the bar underrated the deadliness of the other. For both to draw and commence shooting would doubtless mean a double riddance of evil. Neither cared to take the initiative until he had secured some slight advantage. A second's leeway might easily decide the outcome. Swager pushed the whisky bottle before him back and forth, using both hands. Keen kept his hands on the edge of the bar, the long fingers of his right hand idly tapping the tall hat.

"Why don't you draw?" asked Swager as he continued playing with the bottle.

"Not quite ready."

"You're used to have lots of time. None of those folks at Mountain Medder could fight back, I understand."

"None fought back at me."

Swager smiled slowly and commented, "You think you're going to play some sly trick, Keen. Just like you always plan to do."

"If I'm planning that you can't guess it, Swager."

"I was told to look out for the old umbrella."

"That's for greenhorns, Swager. When I meet a man of your caliber I don't try any shines like that." And he kept up his nervous drumming against the tall hat.

They stared at each other in silence for a full minute. Swager was the first to speak; and he reminded, "Can't hold up trade here all day. Are you waiting for a sheriff to come and separate us?" And his hands ceased pushing the bottle and were clasped loosely about it.

Keen pursed his lips meditatively and rested his hands on the brim of his hat as if about to pick it up. Swager grinned and remarked, "You'll throw your hat and I'll throw the bottle. Is that it?"

"You have the advantage," coldly replied Keen. "We've stayed here long enough. I'm going to button my coat. You can start shooting when you get ready." As he finished he started as if to lift his hat with his right hand. Swager threw the bottle with one hand, and with a yell of triumph darted his other hand for a gun. Even as he was shrieking his joy at having secured the advantage his bulging eyes beheld the thirty-one pocket Colt's drop from the hat into Keen's hand. And that was his last view of earth. For Keen fired while his foe was in the act of pulling a forty-four.

The sound of the shot caused all outside to jump nervously, to duck and give ground. Inside the tent Keen jumped, but not from nervousness. Gaining the prostrate form at the end of the bar he found the dead fingers gripped around the handle of the revolver. He drew the weapon from the belt and gingerly cocked it. Then concealing his own gun he adjusted his hat, buttoned the long coat tightly around his sparse figure and stalked into the street.

His followers shouted in triumph and rushed to congratulate him. Jack Hays reached him first and rejoiced, "It worked! By Creation! It worked! That was a clever notion of yours! Me to drop the gun in your hat while we was stepping up to the bar—"

"Damn you! Will you shut up!" hissed Keen. Then in a loud voice, "Swager started to draw on me, but I was quicker." Lowering his head he warned Hays, "If anyone thinks anything else it'll be because you talked. You know what I'll do."

The bartender slowly advanced to the tent, his face twisted with dread of what he would find. Elder Keen halted the man and produced a roll of greenbacks and gave it to him and loudly proclaimed:

"An attempt was made on my life. I defended myself. The rascal had a gun out and cocked when I fired. Bartender, this money will help make up the loss of trade while that rascal was trying to kill me."

Darby and Fevernager entered the tent with the bartender. The curious swarmed after them until there was no room for another. After examining the dead man and noting the tightly clutched weapon Darby muttered, "That Keen is the devil, or else this fellow never earned his reputation."

"He was a bad one, but I was backing him so he could git a square shake. Can't savvy it," said Fevernager. "Denver men'd bet five to one he could outdraw and outshoot Elder Keen. Some gun-game, but I can't name it."

This affair quickly gained wide publicity as the men involved were believed to be among the most deadly of their profession. The scene of the killing was thronged with the morbidly curious and the proprietor told his friends that a few more attractive homicides would permit him to sell out and take his pile back to Pennsylvania.

Keen's gaunt figure was pointed out to newcomers and he was eyed with respect and fear as he stalked grimly from resort to resort. Other gun-fighters a-plenty were ambitious to add to their notches, but there was none, who, like Willie Swager, cared to test his skill against the Elder. Nor did Keen make the mistake of many another bully by presuming on his terrible prowess. His bearing was that of one gentle by nature. A stranger to his identity might have put him down as a shy man. No longer did he appropriate another's dinner from a passing tray, or order a round of drinks and tell the bartender to put it on the slate. His henchmen, who had assumed the exploit would permit them to bulldoze and indulge in great license, were disgusted at the change in the man.

When Charley Martin would have violently preempted a grader's place at the bar in the New Idea he was disgusted to have the Elder say, "This gentleman got here first." Then to the grader, "Keep your place, sir. First come, first served."

Later in the evening Hays made bold to complain, "If you'd cut loose we could own this town tonight."

"Tonight? Yes, you fool. And hang by the neck from one of the railroad bridge stringers tomorrow, perhaps," replied Keen. "You have nothing in your head. You can't see beyond your nose. I'm planning to weather the winter in this town and strike for a big stake in the spring. Some of you with me tonight, who want to make things hum, won't be on hand to rake down the big pot when the new grass comes in."

THE shooting was discussed in City Hall. Darby was asked to give his version of it, as it was known he was present and was the first to examine the dead man. He told what he had observed and concluded with declaring his belief it was a case of the quickest man winning. He was convinced from what he had heard pass between the two men that Swager was in town for no other purpose than to kill Keen if he could. A citizen regretted that both had not dropped dead. Others argued Keen was too venomous a man to remain in town. Opposed to this view a merchant urged that Keen be made city marshal with orders to clean house.

The agitation for a vigilance committee was renewed. Boswell spoke for many who were weary of the increase in lawlessness. He believed a committee should be formed to function until a court and judge could come to Cheyenne. No action was decided upon, however, and nothing came of the meeting except as it must have worked to crystallize public opinion against conditions rapidly becoming intolerable.

Shortly after leaving the gathering, Darby was startled by the sudden appearance of Elder Keen at his side. The latter announced, "Been waiting for you. You gave me a square shake before those men. Your talk made 'em see I acted in self-defense."

"Swager was a professional killer and I had no sympathy with him. Yet Fevernager and I insisted on his getting a square deal. How do you feel about that?"

"More than satisfied! Why, if the boys had cut loose and had happened to pot Swager I'd be riding for my life by this time. Don't get it into your head I have any hard feelings along of the way you 'n' the old man acted up in the saloon. It was a mighty good turn for me. Mistake in letting them go with me. Haven't anything in their heads. But the word was that Swager had two shooting-men with him. So I let the boys trail along to make it even-Stephen. I'm obliged to you and if you ever want anyone killed just say the word."

"Thanks. But I'm foolish enough to think I can do my own killing. Yet I'm glad there's no bad blood between us. I'm starting in working for the railroad and I don't want any blood feuds on my hands at this time.

"Never from me, son! Nor from anyone else if I learn the critter's name," warmly assured the Elder.

Darby entered upon his work the next day and found he must sleep during the daytime if he would prevent wholesale thefts. Express, mail, and freight were arriving by train, and the first night he was on duty he defeated three attempts to break open cars and exchanged shots in the darkness with several lurking figures. The following morning he procured a second gun.

Instead of dreary routine he found himself in the midst of excitement. Every freight car in the long string filling the siding might conceal a thief. A furtive figure, the flash of a gun, and his reckless advance, his own gun barking became the ordinary duty of the night. When Fevernager learned of the excitement to be found at the siding he foresook the saloons to spend many hours with his friend. The first night the two worked together they captured three men trying to break into a car of liquor. These men were freed by the people's court on their representation of seeking a place in which to sleep.

But unless assured of a running fight Fevernager had scant interest in guarding U. P. property and his night visits to the siding almost ceased. Darby offered to secure him a job as assistant, but the old man found the proposition amusing.

"Me using up the few remaining nights left in my life to guard freight cars?" he scoffed. "I'd look purty. If I tied up to that I'd be hankering to sing a travel song inside the first day." The next night he surprised Darby by appearing at the siding and announcing:

"Going up north to visit some old friends among the Dakota."

"They're in a bad mood, they'll kill you," Darby warned.

"I'll try to pick my village. Some would be glad to strip my old hide off. But there's others who'll boil me a dog an' give me a tipi."

"But the season's late. You'll have to hunt up a winter village. Stay here."

"No. It's just one night after t'other here. Just one fight after t'other, with no difference in a dozen of 'em. If a Swager 'n' a Keen could shoot it out each night I'd hang on. And I've l'arned I can't drink all the rum, now it's coming in by carloads. Then again, I'm cur'ous to l'arn how young Baltimore is gittin' along. I may be back almost any time. All depends on the signs. Just now the signs is good. Had a dream of a hawk night 'fore last."

"And I have a feeling you'll never come back. The railroad has made the tribes feel mighty mad."

"Reckon I'll pull through. Dakotas know I don't like these finnified changes any more'n they do. I can git along all right with Crazy Hoss, an' Red Cloud is my friend. But he's prob'ly too far to the east'ard for me to see this trip."

The next day he was gone.

GORL was tremendously busy with his hotel contracts, although as yet the enterprise had no financial foundation. There was much talk and boasting. Cheyenne was to go Denver one better. Cheyenne was entitled to the best hotels between Omaha and the coast. Allan Gorl was the man to swing the proposition now he was in harness again. The Easterner's activities, however, served to keep him away from the dives and his big face took on a better color and his bearing was more incisive and businesslike. Mike Dolin, boss of the bridge crew, told Darby the little Spanish girl sang much and was very happy.

Just as Darby was believing Gorl's rehabilitation was accomplished, it was announced that the new hotel must be deferred. Not only were there no funds, but there was scant likelihood of enough being subscribed. And there was much amusement felt even by those who had been hypnotized by the magnetic Mr. Train. He was a "humdinger," and "cute," and would be a great asset as a steady resident of the town. Gorl suddenly awakening to the realization he had been carrying the load alone, and had wasted his time and energy, and had used borrowed money he was unable to pay back, became very despondent. He was embittered against the town, and he returned to the night life and dissipation. The Spanish girl sang no more.

Shortly after his abandonment of respectability a promiscuous shooting in a dance-hall and the wounding of a girl aroused much anger among the law-abiding. Some picked Keen out as the target and insisted that lynch law was the only cure-all.

Keen was quick to perfect his defenses, and stifled any radical campaign against himself and friends by making it known up and down Crow Creek he was arranging to lead an expedition to wonderful gold fields north of the Platte. He harangued in barrooms, he talked with honest citizens. His plans called for a force big enough to stand off the Indians. He would take along two thousand fighting men, if necessary. He called on merchants to learn to what extent he could depend upon them for supplying outfits and for keeping wagon trains of provisions moving to his relief.

As it was further reported he was enlisting all the gunmen in town, public indignation subsided considerably. Business men knew that the discovery and exploitation of gold fields in the territory would make Cheyenne the outfitting center and jumping-off place, and must bring great prosperity. Any move that would tend to accomplish this, and at the same time denude the town of the rough element was not to be too strongly discouraged. It all resulted for a while that Elder Keen almost took on dignity, and he was greeted by citizens who had thought of him with anathemas. He had arrived a lawless adventurer and he had established his supremacy among bad men by the slaying of Willie Swager. It was accepted as a fact that he could, if he wished, practically control the vicious element.

On December 8th the town witnessed an exhibition of railroad building when the line from the creek to Fort D. A. Russell was commenced and finished in the one day. On the same day the *Rocky Mountain Star* made its appearance. Politics were warming up. The Territorial legislature would soon organize Laramie County with Cheyenne as the county seat.

The year went out with lawlessness on the increase. Public resentment was nearing the breaking point as it was realized the town authorities were unable to stem the rising tide of robberies, vicious assaults, and the many indiscriminate shooting affairs. These offenses were of daily occurrence in dives and on the streets, day and night. Elder Keen and his followers became more brazen in their affronts. Gorl was now discussed as a man gone wrong. Then history repeated itself. A vigilance committee was secretly organized.

None outside the members knew this important fact until early in January, when three men were arrested for robbery and were placed under bonds to appear before the people's court a week or so later. On the day after their release they were found walking abreast down Eddy Street. They were tightly tied together, and on their breasts was fastened a large canvas sign, which read:

$900 *stolen.* $500 *returned.*

Thieves: F. St. Clair, W. Crier, E. D. Brownville.

City authorities please not interfere un-

til 10 *o'clock A.M. Next case goes up a tree.*

Beware of the Vigilance Committee.

The excitement caused, when word spread throughout the town that the vigilantes were at work, was explosive. Darby, among the first to sign the membership rolls, was abroad early to observe the effect. Curious crowds followed the three men, who were not released until the hour designated. There was open rejoicing, and there were angry threats. The fact the trio had not been strung up permitted some of the roughs to believe the committee lacked nerve and was contented with making a gesture.

Darby entered the New Idea to observe the reaction there and was promptly accosted by Elder Keen, who remarked, "Been enjoying the show?"

"I saw the three men. What do you think?"

"Committee's made a big mistake," was the prompt reply.

The head of a big forwarding company turned from the bar and glowered at the back of the speaker's head. His expression quickly changed when the Elder continued, "Those men should have been stretched. That's the medicine this town needs."

"Would you feel that way if Jack Hays was one of them?" murmured Darby.

"Absolutely, if he stole," said Keen. "A clumsy thief deserves a noose. Wonder what next move the committee will make?" And his somber gaze searched Darby's face shrarply.

The Southerner shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Reckon no one outside the committee knows when those fellows decide to jump."

Keen drew him apart and told him, "I have enemies in this town, who'd like to do me dirt. But I'm engaged in legitimate work. In the spring I'm going to lead an army north of the Platte and find gold. It'll mean a bonanza to every business man in Cheyenne. I hope my enemies won't be able to make folks believe the lies they're telling about me."

"I hope not, too, Elder. And I wish you would use your influence to keep Gorl in bounds. There's ugly talk about his threatening to use a gun at Headquarters Saloon the other night."

"I'll try, but if he makes a fool of himself there's no reason why he should be favored."

KEEN had been right in diagnosing the first dose as being too weak. On the night of January 16th Jack Hays, Dan Miller, Andy Harris, Jack Breslan, and a man called Cunningham, were among the desperadoes who indulged in a general shooting scrape in the New Idea. Darby was in the saloon before the smoke had cleared away. Gorl was there, wearing two guns and a knife, and was ugly drunk. He was making wild threats. Darby seized his arm and got him on to the street and shook him violently and warned:

"Do you want to be hung? Keep your mouth closed. This is a bad business. Can you walk?"

" 'Course I can walk. Let go my arm. I'll take no cheap talk from any of those skunks." And he would have gone back into the saloon had not Darby spun him about.

"Listen, Gorl," he warned. "You're listed as one to be hung if you don't behave. See this mob? Hear them? There are vigilantes among them. If you go back in there say your prayers first."

This sobered Gorl somewhat and greatly dulled the edge of his drunken rage. "My God! They can't feel hard against me!" he cried.

"Get away. Keep under cover. Button your coat over those guns."

"I'll go up and stay at Dolin's," muttered Gorl, and his broad face in the window light was wet with sweat although the night was bitter cold.

"Then go at once."

Darby watched him hurry away until satisfied he could keep his feet. He turned back to re-enter the saloon and found Elder Keen just ahead of him. Keen had heard of the shooting on the street. He went up to Hays and paused only long enough to say:

"Run for it, you fool. You've stuck your head through a noose."

"Me 'n' the boys are banking on you, Elder."

"I can't lift a hand. Run for it. Through the back door. Git out of town."

"They won't do nothing," sneered Hays, but the Elder had hurriedly left him. As he stared after the tall figure and realized the man could be of no assistance his gaze grew worried. He heard the babel of execrations in the street. He saw angry men crowding each other in an attempt to enter. He signaled his companions and ran to a back door. Once outside, the gang secured horses and rode for the mountains.

Darby hastened to City Hall and found the committee gathering. Worse crimes than the wholesale shooting-bee had been overlooked; but that was before the committee organized.

An eye-witness of the affair announced: "This devilish work will not stop until we've made an example. We treated those three thieves too easy. The roughs don't believe we'll go any farther. Now we must make good, or turn the town over to robbers and murderers. They'll be worse than ever if we weaken. Someone must go up a tree for this!"

"Was Elder Keen concerned in it?" asked the chairman.

"No," replied the first speaker. Then he gave the names of Hays and his companions.

"Keen came in after it was all over," spoke up Darby. "I was there ahead of him."

"Allan Gorl was in there, but he didn't use any guns. Just drunk," added the first speaker.

"It's come to a pass where we must do some hanging," slowly said a clothing merchant.

The manager of a big warehouse took the floor to say, "That man Gorl is a bad influence. I blame him more than I do some of the scum. He knows better. He's lived better. He seeks criminals and filth because he likes it."

"Run him out of town with those you don't hang," urged a banker.

"Our first work is to catch Hays and his crowd," decided the chairman.

"They're hoofing it to the mountains," called out a member.

"Pass word for the boys to meet at the corral. Bring a new rope, well greased. We'll find them," directed the chairman. Then to Darby he said, "You have your railroad work to do. Stay here and see if you can't kill a thief while we're gone."

The criminal element was much impressed by the spectacle of a hundred men riding from town to take the first drastic step in enforcing law and order. Before the cavalcade was a mile on its forty mile ride the more timid of the worthless were riding south and east.

That night was unusually quiet in Cheyenne. Darby patroled the siding till daybreak, but saw no prowlers. He went to his room and slept till early evening. While he was eating supper in the Dodge House a boy brought him a verbal message from Mike Dolin. It was to the effect that several rough characters were loafing near the siding. Buckling on his guns he reached the siding in time to exchange shots with several furtive figures. None of the cars had been entered but one of the doors had been forced.

With the first streak of daylight Dolin appeared. Darby asked, "Gorl at your house?"

"There the night of the shootin', an' kept close till last night. He's spent th' night hellin' 'round somewhere."

"Put two of your workmen on guard here till I get back, or a cart comes for the goods." Then he combed the town, once more in search of the Easterner.

He found him playing poker in a tent place with Keen and three freighters. Almost using force he managed to get him away from the table. He asked, "Are you sober enough to understand my talk?"

Gorl laughed sardonically. "Talk? All you do to me is to talk. As to being sober, the Elder and I are nearly a thousand each ahead. So talk fast as I'm going back to crowd my luck."

"Even now you're listed as one of the men to be run out of town. Get a horse and ride."

"Like hell I'll ride!" jeered Gorl. "You're forgetting I'm Allan Gorl, big business man, a friend of Sidney Dillon and Oak Ames. I'm not the sort they run out of railroad towns."

"A clean sweep is to be made," whispered Darby. "I'm doing wrong in telling you even this much. Get a horse and ride!"

"You're excited, Darby. You can't seriously believe that Allan Gorl, without any reason, will run away from any town."

"I've done my best. Be it on your own head."

"I grant you mean well. But you talk foolish. This vigilance business has affected your head. Vigilantes bothering

Allan Gorl? It's enough to make one laugh. I have nothing against the committee, mind you, although it's an illegal association and engaged in illegal work. Not that it's done much work. Simply threatened some poor devils, who were already within the jurisdiction of the people's court. That would be contempt of court back East and mean a long visit in jail. I tell you, Darby, your mind's obsessed by bluster and noise, nothing but bluster—"

He was interrupted by Charley Martin staggering in, his face gray with terror. "Have you heard?" he gasped, halting by the card table and clawing wildly at the Elder's shoulder.

Keen dropped his cards and began stacking his chips and in a low voice inquired, "Heard what, Charley?"

"Those damn vigilantes have hung Jack Hays, Shorty, and Keith. Hung them at Dale City, forty miles from here. Now they're riding back to do more bloody work."

Elder Keen coughed gently, and pushed his chips across to the banker, and said, "It's daylight. I'll cash in."

CHAPTER VIII

ELDER KEEN SEEKS NEW FIELDS

WITH Gorl away from town Darby pursued his work in a more comfortable frame of mind. It would have been difficult for him to explain why he should assume any responsibility for the man's behavior. He had not acted from selfishness as Gorl, by his flight in the company of desperate men, could never carry out his partnership arrangements. Where Gorl had stood high in the opinion of worth-while citizens he now stood low; and his name was added to the taboo list drawn up by the secretary of the vigilance committee. Darby had felt bitter in contrasting his meager chances with the golden opportunities which had surrounded the Easterner. Yet he had felt impelled to help him. He was not conscious of ever feeling any liking for the man. And he had endeavored to act the rôle of guardian and protector. From Mike Dolin he learned that the unhappy Spanish girl was seeking a much-needed consolation in her religion.

"He's no good. Never was no good," declared Dolin angrily.

"The West has spoiled him. He's no good," agreed Darby.

"Thin why be ye always trying to act the big daddy, an' always trying to help the loafer?"

Darby shook his head and with a wry smile answered, "I've often wondered, Mike. Maybe it's my way of doing penance for being jealous of him and his ability to do big things, and for envying him for the success he made of his life, until loose living upset him."

When the committee met to adopt a new code of procedure in the matter of warning undesirables to leave town, the names of Gorl and Keen were crossed out because of their flight. There had been some annoyance in the cases of several unwholesome characters, who insisted they had not been notified by any individual, known to be a vigilante, that they must leave the town. Also, there were instances of honest men receiving what purported to be a committee warning to quit Cheyenne forthwith. These latter warnings undoubtedly were sent by rogues, who sought to throw the whole disciplinary programme into confusion. It was decided to do away with all ambiguity by means of the utmost publicity.

On January 22nd the *Rocky Mountain Star* contained a notice, prominently displayed, which announced:

> We think this public notification the best method. No person will be notified to leave this territory except through a public newspaper of this place, and if said notified parties will not leave within twenty-four hours, the Committee will no longer be responsible for their safety.
>
> George Brown, Neil Murphy, Cocke, at the New Idea, Jack Bristol, Thomas Campbell, Eugene Debonville, Frank St. Clair, Al Cunningham, Slippery Bill, and Dave Mullins: The above parties will leave this territory in twenty-four hours.
>
> By the order of the Vigilance Committee.

Within the time limit the men named had vanished from their usual haunts and the belief spread that a panacea at last had been discovered.

The committee did not always condemn. It sometimes served as clearing house for character, and there is no record of an innocent man being punished. In February, William Reed, wagon master at Camp Carlin, was acquitted by a verdict of "justifiable homicide" for shooting Mike Heenan. A month later the committee showed its teeth when Charley Martin quarreled with his pal, Andy Harris, and killed him. The two men had become prosperous overnight and had bought the Beauvais House and turned it into a home for vice. While but few could regret the outcome of the quarrel, the committee found the dead man presented a case of alleged murder; and Martin was taken into custody promptly. At the same time John Morgan was picked up for horse-stealing.

The trial revealed that Martin was of a respectable family and had worked for Russell, Majors & Waddell as wagonmaster, but had degenerated into a desperado through evil associations. The evidence also revealed the source of the prosperity of the deceased and the accused, and cleared up the mystery surrounding the robbery of five thousand dollars in January, General Dandy being the victim. The robbery alone would have been sufficient to send the perpetrators to the noose. Morgan's guilt was established to the satisfaction of the committee, and the defendants were speedily found guilty and hung on the night of March 20th. Martin was executed on the site of I. C. Whipple's house and Morgan back of the Elephant Corral.

This first execution in Cheyenne caused a further shrinkage in the criminal population and lowered the boisterous tone of the dives. Many of the unwanted wisely decided it was time to seek new fields without waiting for the committee's warning. It pleased these hurried emigrants to know a desirable objective awaited them on the main fork of the Laramie river, sixty-five miles from Cheyenne, where the next "roaring" town was to be created almost overnight, and where the hectic history of Crow Creek could be repeated.

"Laramie City" was already spoken of, and it was known the railroad would sell town lots in April. Even if undisturbed in Cheyenne, many of the vicious, as well as merchants, home builders, and land speculators, would have been quick to grasp the opportunity for rascality and honest gain. The stampede was at its height in March. At the time Martin and Morgan paid their scores with their necks the Laramie townsite was covered with wagons, tents, dugouts and rude shanties. It was known that the railroad would arrive in May. With so short a time to wait speculation ran riot. Four hundred lots were sold in the first week. At the end of the second week there were five hundred structures of logs, cross-ties, canvas and boards ready for legitimate business, homes, and vice.

TOWARD the end of April, Darby was ordered to visit the new town and look for stolen property, suspected to have been sold to merchants who had bought in good faith. Mike Dolin, knowing of his errand, spoke of it at home and as a result acted as the Spanish girl's messenger. She wished to talk with Darby before he left town.

The visit was disagreeable as Darby anticipated her business with him. He called at the house the day before starting on his journey and the Dolins left him alone with the girl. She began, "My friend, you go north."

Her face was wan and pale and he found himself pitying her. "You want to ask me to see Gorl, if he is there," he told her.

"Yes, yes, my friend. Find him and tell him I pray to the Virgin. Tell him I pray he will stop evil. Tell him I pray he will go back to the East among his own kind, to go back without seeing me again, if that will help him be a good man."

"I'll tell him. You know I wish him well."

"And there have been times I wished him bad," she whispered. "I have been ver' bad, but I pray he will be a good man, back East, somewhere, anywhere—" She broke down and terminated the interview by running from the room.

Darby traveled on the construction train to the head of the rails and then by horse, his credentials securing him a mount from the construction boss. On his left, in the west, he had for beauty the trim, clean-cut Diamond Peaks of the Medicine Bow Range. Beyond these, and southwesterly, loomed the faint outlines of the Snowy Range. Seventy miles in the north towered Laramie Peak. Ahead, surrounded by plains of richest grazing, and on the banks of a beautiful, clear stream, was situated the haphazard collection of shelters that marked the end of a U. P. division, and which threatened to be an awful sink of iniquity. As Darby rode down the last grade and swept his gaze over the rolling folds of grassland, seven thousand feet above sea level, he was reminded of Gorl's insistence he could make much money raising cattle.

But Allan Gorl had drifted far from his bucolic ambitions. When Darby found him in "The Bucket of Blood," so called from its numerous bloody encounters, he would not have recognized him at first sight if not for the presence of Elder Keen. The Easterner had allowed his beard and hair to grow and the rough stubble and ragged locks gave him a disheveled, disreputable appearance. His clothing was coarse and showed rough wear, and he wore his trousers inside of boots. There was no longer a vestige of the well groomed, well dressed business man in the heavy, slouching figure.

The two men were at a table. Keen's long coat was tightly buttoned as usual, and his long, thin face was freshly shaven. The familiar old umbrella was held upright between his knees as he faced his companion over a bottle of whisky. He scowled on beholding Darby and there was no friendliness in his remark to Gorl:

"Allan, here comes the parson who's turned vigilante. Well, Darby, I'm not over-glad to see you. But how's everything in Cheyenne?"

"Quiet. Hello, Gorl," and the Southerner thrust out his hand and clasped that of the Easterner. He did not offer to shake hands with Elder Keen.

Gorl lifted his big head and turned his bloodshot eyes on the Southerner and his first words were, "How's Dollie?"

"All broken up from not hearing from you. She gave me a message, which I'll deliver when we're alone."

"Turned saint?" asked Keen.

"I only know what the Dolins tell me," Darby coldly replied. "She still lives with them. She's changed much since she used to make the rounds with Gorl."

"She's all right," growled Gorl. "But her personality faded when she went in for religion. Little fool! Yet I miss her. What luck if I ran down and paid her a visit?"

"I wouldn't go to Cheyenne yet, Allan. Get into some decent work up here first."

"They'd never know me with these whiskers."

"The Dolins would. You couldn't see the girl unless you called there."

Elder Keen laughed softly and remarked, "He's bound on making you a Bible-spouter, Allan."

"I never used the Cloth to cover up deviltry, sir," hotly retorted Darby.

Elder Keen drew in a deep breath and his eyes glittered wildly. Gorl read the storm signal, and rearing his head he harshly commanded, "You keep pleasant, Keen. Darby, tell the girl I want her to come up here."

Darby shook his head. "She wouldn't come if I gave her your talk. She's in a decent home. When you can provide her as honest a place to live in go and make the offer."

"Well, by Creation! That's never!" softly exclaimed the Elder. "He's as much as telling you to marry the girl."

"Leave be, Keen," mumbled Gorl.

Keen quit the subject, but not because of Gorl's hostil attitude. Curiosity was demanding an explanation. He inquired, "Up here on vigilance committee work, Darby?"

"Cheyenne isn't policing Laramie City. Railroad business brought me here. I must be going."

"I'll see you before you pull out," heavily said Gorl.

Before Darby could reply, or turn away, a young man, barely out of his 'teens, and dressed with exaggerated foppery, had halted at the table. He stared inquiringly at the Southerner.

Gorl introduced them, saying, "This is Lee Darby from Cheyenne, Kid. Darby, this is a young friend. Just, 'Kid.' "

"You come in a trifle late, Mister, but still there's good pots to be opened," jauntily acknowledged the Kid, his mouth twisting down at one corner in a peculiarly sinister smile.

"This man is a member of the Cheyenne vigilance committee," harshly explained Keen.

The Kid's transformation was instant. The twisted smile became a snarl. One hand moved toward an ivory-handled revolver. Gorl quickly added, "And he's a good friend of mine."

The Kid's hand halted, but he laughed shrilly and commented, "A hell of a team! You two hooked up together?"

"Just leaving when you came in," Darby pleasantly informed. "See you again sometime, and I hope you'll feel as merry as you do now."

The Kid stared after him until he was lost in the street; then he dropped on a seat and muttered, "Just what did he mean by that? See me again sometime, and hopes I'll be as merry then as I be now."

"Probably means he expects to see you looking down from a tree," suggested Keen. "He's a leading member of the Cheyenne better-than-you society."

"What d'ye mean, Gorl? Ringing in a gent of that caliber?" angrily demanded the Kid.

"Hold your jaw," grumbled Gorl. "Enough to know he's the man that fetched me word so I could clear out of Cheyenne before the vigilantes could get interested in me. He may preach at times; and he's made me mad at times. But he's tried to do me good turns."

"Well, to hell with him," airily dismissed the Kid. "Let's talk business. That twenty thousand in greenbacks 'n' gold will come in to the express-office today or tomorrow. We divide it four ways. Long Steve and Con Weiger and Asa Moore splitting one fourth, each of us taking a fourth."

Keen's somber eyes sparkled. "It should be quite simple and safe," he murmured. "But as we three do the work it should be split in fifths. A fourth is too much for them to divide."

"I like all I can git," assured the Kid. "But Asa and Con runs this place and it's Long Steve who give us the first tip. They said a fourth and I agreed."

"Too much!" snapped the Elder. "You're a young fool to do any talking. It's for your elders and betters to make agreements. Don't do that again." And his menacing gaze caused the young desperado to squirm uneasily.

Gorl shivered and hoarsely whispered, "I haven't gone that far yet. I think I'll keep out and let you fellows divide it."

"Too high minded, huh?" muttered the Kid. "You kindly hear all my talk and then quit cold, and perlitely say, 'No, thanky: not any for me.' How'd we know you won't split? You've been in the talk. You'll be in the work."

"Shut up!" commanded the Elder. "You've got a notion you're the lead-team. Gorl won't blab, because he knows his life wouldn't be worth a split-pea if he did. 'Better'n that, because he never goes back on a friend."

"I'm no informer," insisted Gorl. "But if you try to work that game you'll have to kill. I absolutely draw the line at killing."

"If you ain't in it you don't have to draw no line whatsomever," reminded the Kid.

"This kind of talk gets us nothing," tersely cut in Keen. "No one's going be rubbed out. Game is as simple as pie. The watchman will be asleep. It's easy to open the window. No bars. Two of us will slide inside and cover him and get the stuff. A third man outside on guard to give warning. Gorl can act as sentinel. Con and Asa will swear we were in a poker game in the back room from early evening till morning if we need an alibi. Which we won't."

"There maybe more than one guard. I don't want to touch it," said Gorl.

"You're in on the 'know.' You must be in on the 'do,' " grated the Elder. "You've thrown in with us. You're reckoned one of us. You haven't a friend outside of our circle. You'll be perfectly safe. No one will be hurt and the express company will make good the money; and that'll end it. You're with us, or against us, Gorl. If you hold back even I couldn't save your hide."

Gorl rose hurriedly and weakly replied, "There must be no bloodshed. If there is I'll tell the truth and then take my place in a noose."

The Kid slid into his chair and stared at his bulky figure until it passed through the doorway. Then he spat in disgust and warned, "He'll talk. He's no good."

Keen smiled quietly. "He talks to us, but his reputation won't let him talk to others. He's tried being a 'bad' man and failed. Boys have humored him along. Still he's a queer kind; the kind that'll work with us in earnest once he slops over."

"But I don't like him. Who wants that kind? Best thing to do with him is have Long Steve hit him with his iron bar and haul him out on the prairie."

"You're young," sighed Keen. "Nothing so difficult as to explain anything to a young person who 'lows he knows it all. Unless you listen to your elders, Kid, you'll never live to reach my age. Gorl forgits more'n a minute than you ever knew. Why do you think I've bothered with him? Because he's got a head. Once he's over the line he'll be plumb reckless. He'll throw in on any deal. He'll use his head to plan big things; bigger jobs than ever we dreamed of. Then we'll rake in big pots. He's a thinker. He's a big man from his eyes up. And don't you try to be smart with him. You be meeching 'n' polite. I've stood quite a bit from him. If I can be patient a cub can hold his yawp."

This was delivered with such savage earnestness that the Kid wilted and meekly agreed, "If that's the game, I'm mum. But to git him yoked with us right you've got to git him into a killing."

"I've thought that all out sometime ago. When the time comes we'll have to use you."

"What ya mean?" shrilly demanded the Kid. "Use me? Plan to have me figger's a stiff?"

"You'll never grow up," wearily replied Keen. "Gorl thinks he's a gun-fighter when he wants to be one. But drunk or sober he'll never reach the point where he'll kill."

"Urhuh?" mumbled the Kid, staring blankly across the table.

"But if he's made to believe he killed a man while drunk, and is shown the corpse, say with a hunk of your lead in it, then you'll have been very useful."

The Kid's mouth drew down in a vicious grin. He leaned over the table and admiringly said, "You talk like a chief, old pard. I sabe. Just tell when."

IN THE meanwhile Darby was wandering through the chaos of a town. He found it a second Cheyenne, with land speculation more intense. He recognized many of Cheyenne's citizens, a good fifty per cent being undesirables. In searching for the stolen goods he conversed with various merchants. While he failed to locate any of the property he did get side-lights on Gorl. Boswell, of Cheyenne, who was in town looking after a business venture, told him:

"A fine example of a strong man gone wrong. He had every chance in Cheyenne. I don't understand him. Acts as if the devil had possession of him."

"I think I begin to understand him," Darby slowly replied. "Not only from what he's done, but from the talk he's made Now I came up here to make money so I might live lazily and quietly, and forget the war. He always has lived quietly and has made lots of money. He came out here to enjoy a change. After fifty years of routine living the desire for something different boiled over. He plunged into the things he'd kept away from all his life. Not entirely because he enjoyed them, but because they were different. He went in for gambling, heavy drinking, patronizing dance-halls. He slipped farther than he intended. Now he finds it hard, if not impossible, to crawl back to the top of the slope."

"He's considered a hard, desperate man."

"He's hating himself this very minute," insisted Darby.

The proprietor of the boot and shoe store, where they were talking, added quite a few details of Gorl's activities, and gave as his opinion, "Seems to like swaggering around, acting the bully. Quick to clap a hand on a gun. If he didn't have that tall, thin wolf of a Keen always at his shoulder some of the boys would call his bluff."

"Just what I've said. He's play-acting," said Darby.

"When he makes a pilgrim eat dirt by grabbing for a gun it's just the same as if he drew that gun," replied the storekeeper. "Of course he's noticed more as he doesn't fit in with the roughs. Still he wants to fit in. When we get around to do a little regulating he'll be remembered."

"I believe the man wants to let go and crawl back, but doesn't see how he can," argued Darby. "He's thrown away a fortune. He wouldn't steal a cent. Keen and his crowd keep with him, live with him. He's afraid to try and shake them off."

"Then he's a coward and ought to swing," hotly declared Boswell.

"He will, once we organize and find him in town," promised the storekeeper.

Darby found a place to sleep in an engineer's tent and retired early. The night noises, punctuated by a few pistol shots, disturbed his rest none. In the morning, now satisfied the stolen goods were securely cached, if in the town, he mounted his horse and rode out several miles to see the country before starting for Crow Creek. He came to two small ponds, clamorous with bird life. Rolling, grassy ridges gently sloped down from the foothills of the Medicine Bow Range. For a hundred miles to the north stretched the Laramie Plains with an average width of forty or fifty miles. The contrast between this wonderful, clean country and the hurriedly erected habitations back on the main fork of the Laramie vividly appealed to the Southerner. The ride served to wash his mind of disagreeable things. He felt a strange uplift of spirit as he reluctantly turned toward the town. Two miles from the river he was jolted out of his new optimism by a horrible discovery.

The war had compelled him to see many dead man, killed by violence. But the battered object sprawling in the new grass, and causing his mount to shy, shrieked murder and brought the evil atmosphere of the town to the open. After the first glance he became the investigator. He took his horse one side and left him to graze and then returned to the dead man. A cursory examination showed the man's pockets had been emptied and that he had died from several terrible blows on the head. He was dressed like an Easterner and it was obvious he had seen but little of the new world before being struck down. The coyotes had found him, yet the evidence was sufficient to satisfy Darby he had not been dead more than forty-eight hours.

He could attempt nothing in the way of burial. Riding hurriedly back to town he reported his discovery to the shoe-store proprietor.

"Devil's work!" exclaimed the storekeeper, reaching for his hat.

"You're telling the town marshal?"

The man paused and answered, "Not until I've told others. Going first to the gun-store. Man is white who runs it. Con Weiger acts as marshal, named by Asa Moore, who runs the saloon. Weiger hasn't stopped any deviltry yet. That poor man was never killed out on the prairie. He was taken out there in a cart, or on a horse, and left for the wolves to eat. Someone's going to do a rope-dance for such works."

Darby decided to leave for Cheyenne on the morrow. The town was "roaring" as he made the rounds after supper. The population seemed to have noticeably increased during the last twenty-four hours. More gamblers and cappers had arrived. The exodus from Cheyenne appeared to be continuous. One of the familiar figures to confront him was that of Deuce, the diminutive gambler. It was in a room set aside for poker and Deuce was waiting to sit in at one of the tables.

He seized Darby's arm and led him to one side and began, "Messenger for Dollie again. Same line of lingo. Wants me to see you and ask you to get Gorl away from this town. I know she talked the same thing to you before you came up here, but a man has to do what Dollie asks. If I wasn't a dwarf in size and bulked as big as that big good-for-nothing I mighta stood a chance."

"You like her?" murmured Darby.

"Worse'n that," bitterly confessed Deuce. "All I'd ever ask of happiness is to marry her tomorrow."

"You're a big man, no matter how little you weigh, Deuce. I'm returning to Cheyenne tomorrow. My talk will make her sad. It does no good trying to help that man. He was determined to make a certain kind of a bed, and now he must lie in it."

"You'll tell her I delivered her talk?" Deuce asked him.

"Of course. If I can find Gorl tonight I'll make one more try. It'll amount to nothing. It does no good to talk to him when any of the gang is with him. And it's hard to catch him alone. He is thoroughly miserable, and hasn't guts enough to break loose."

"There's a feller cleaned out. I'll take his place. Be sure'n tell her I fetched her talk." And he was across the room and sliding into the chair just vacated by a pilgrim, who had fancied he could play the Laramie City brand of poker.

DARBY wandered into several resorts and found the same scenes of night life that characterized the town on Crow Creek. The small army of parasites were battening on the unsophisticated. There were honest women in town, mothers who were thinking of schools for their children, and wives of merchants, who persisted in sharing all the disagreeable phases of a rowdy frontier rather than to be separated from their husbands. But these kept to their homes once the sun slid behind the Medicine Bow

Range, and waited for a day when decency would speak, and vice would heed.

He wandered into the Bucket of Blood and found a seat at a table close by the one occupied by the town marshal and Big Ed Barnard, his assistant. Weiger rose and joined Darby and in a low voice said:

"What you've found has been told me. We've got a tip. We're looking it up right now."

"Good hunting to you," heartily wished Darby. "I'd like to be here to help pull on the rope, but I'm going back to Cheyenne tomorrow."

"We can man a rope and to spare," assured Weiger, and he walked away followed by Big Ed.

Asa Moore and his assistant were kept busy serving drinks and taking in the money. Trays of liquor were being carried into the back room. Darby ordered a glass of beer as an excuse for loitering. If Gorl was not in the back room he would search for him no longer. Once Darby thought he heard the Easterner's deep voice, but he knew it would only be inviting trouble if he attempted an interview in the presence of the gang. He was slightly interested when the Kid entered from the street, his petulant mouth drawn down at one corner. He stopped at the bar for a drink. When served by the proprietor the latter jerked his head toward the back room. The Kid remained at the bar, rather to Darby's surprise and took much time in drinking. His frequent glances at the closed door suggested he was waiting for someone.

The sordidness of the place, and the depravity of many of its inmates suddenly decided Darby he had done enough, and to attempt more would be useless. He would have taken his departure if not for the Kid's quick interest in a new arrival. This man was neatly dressed and was neither workman nor gambler, so far as Darby could deduce. His face was open and genial and the proprietor greeted him heartily as he took the order for a glass of beer.

The Kid sidled away and entered the back room. Moore remarked, "Going on duty soon. See you've strapped on your gun."

"Rather have a good club," laughingly replied the customer.

"Not afraid of anyone trying to break in?"

"Nothing to steal that a thief would care to handle. Try to deliver everything the day it arrives. And no one could come fussing 'round without waking me. I'm on the inside with a gun. Have all the advantage. Trying work, though."

"Have to keep awake in the dark. That must be trying," murmured the proprietor, filling the glass and refusing pay.

"Sleep. No use staying awake. No one can monkey with the place without waking me. Trouble is I don't have anything to do daytimes. Well, I must be trotting along."

"And go dry till morning? That's tough. Let me send down some bottled beer."

"No, no. Not even beer when I'm on the job. Then I mightn't wake up."

"Then another on the house. Whisky?"

"Beer. Sometimes I wish something would happen just to liven things up."

Having identified him as a watchman Darby felt sympathy for him, although many of his nights in Cheyenne had been lively enough. The man finished his beer and lighted a cigar and paused to gaze idly about the room. Gorl came in from the back room, followed by Keen and the Kid, and a very tall man known as Long Steve. The four lined up at the bar with Gorl standing next to the watchman. Darby could not decide whether Gorl, half drunk and unsteady on his feet, lurched against the watchman, or was jostled against him by Long Steve. Gorl was quick to blame the watchman and hoarsely asked:

"Want the earth? Why are you bumping into me?"

The watchman truculently answered, "Talk to yourself. You're doing the crowding. I haven't moved."

Long Steve stepped from the line and moved down to the end of the bar. This brought the Kid next to Gorl. His profile, as he watched the two men, was very cruel. With a low laugh he whispered something to Gorl. The latter violently threatened the watchman.

"You make any back talk to me and you'll be sorry."

"You can't make me feel sorry if your whiskers was a yard long," jeered the watchman.

Gorl faced him, leaning against the bar, and hesitated. Again the Kid whispered over his shoulder. The Easterner angrily told him, "Shut up! I know when I'm being put upon without you telling me."

The watchman coldly remarked, "You know, you can go to hell so far as I'm concerned."

Still Gorl hesitated, a sober fragment of his mind trying to hold him back. Keen leaned far forward to look by Gorl and fix his glaring gaze on the watchman. He told Gorl, "You don't have to stand for such talk as that."

The watchman did not relish the expression of Keen's long face. He bluntly confessed, "I don't hanker for any trouble with Elder Keen. I'll quit."

He would have left the bar had not Gorl in a sudden gust of rage, caught him by the shoulder and shouted:

"What trouble you have is with me! No one else is chipping in." And he dropped his hand on a gun.

"You're no trouble!" jeered the watchman, with his hand on a weapon.

Both drew their weapons, cocking them simultaneously, and men fled from the bar and those at the tables dropped on the floor. But neither man fired. The anticlimax was ridiculous. Darby breathed in great relief as he realized neither of the men wanted to shoot.

Darby stood up and started to advance to the bar to prevent the men from hysterically killing, for the spectators were now laughing and shouting abuse. Keen hissed some order. Gorl stood motionless gaping at the watchman. The latter, equally as blank of gaze, stared at the Easterner.

"One's scared! T'other dassent!" yelled a man.

The Kid's thin hand closed over Gorl's. There was a heavy report and the watchman looked vastly surprised for a second, then pitched forward against Gorl. The latter dropped his smoking weapon and caught the limp body and in a strangled voice cried:

"My God! How did it happen?"

"Self-defense!" yelled Elder Keen, quickly stepping to Gorl's side. "As clean a case of self-defense as I ever see!"

"Self-defense," barked the proprietor. "The fool wanted trouble and he got it. Telling me a half minute before Mr. Gorl entered how he wished something would happen to liven things up. Lug him into the back room. Kid, go and tell the marshal."

DARBY, standing within a few feet of the tragic group, thought rapidly. Keen had seen him before the fatal shot was fired. Now he was staring at him, one hand inside the old umbrella. Realizing the great odds against him and as the crowd seemed intent on giving Gorl a clean bill, Darby refrained from stating what he had observed. Already the Kid was streaking out the door and the corpse was being removed. Gorl continued staring about him in dazed fashion and glaring at the big gun still clutched in his hand. Elder Keen grabbed the weapon and restored it to the holster and took Gorl's arm and hurried him to the door.

Darby remained motionless as the two men gained the door. He heard Gorl wildly asking, "But how did it happen? I don't remember."

And he heard the Elder loudly reply, "You're the quickest man on the shoot in Laramie tonight. You defended your life. You were within your rights." Then they were in the street and the door was closed.

Sauntering up to the bar Darby asked the bartender, "Who's the man who was shot?"

"Bert something. Used to be watchman at the express office. Why?" The last suspiciously.

"Always like to know who the man is I see shot," explained Darby.

Leaving the saloon he walked down to the express office and found a man standing in the doorway. He gave his name and employment and said:

"A man, they tell me is watchman here, called Bert, has just been shot and killed in Moore's saloon."

"Good Lord! Bert killed! I was waiting for him to come. I thought I knew you, Darby. I'm the agent you met yesterday when you pulled in. Now I must stay here. Who killed him? What for? Bert was always a gentleman."

"Got to arguing with a big man at the bar. Moore and others will tell you the big man, Allan Gorl, shot and killed in self-defense. But I saw a small fellow, called the Kid, reach over and pull the trigger of the big man's gun. Neither man wanted to go further with the quarrel, but that young hellion chipped in. I'm telling you this, so if Gorl ever is haled up for it you can say I told you, that I'm a member of the Cheyenne vigilance committee; and that I'll come anytime I'm wanted to testify under oath that the Kid did the shooting. I started to say it in the saloon; but there were too many of a kind there. Someone would have plugged me before I could get fifty feet from the place."

The agent sank limply down in the doorway. "Terrible!" he repeated several times. Finally he rose and requested, "I'll remember what you've told me, Darby. Will you mind staying here till I can notify my wife I must stand guard here tonight?"

"Not a bit. I'll do better than that. I'll sleep inside and keep watch for you."

"That's neighborly of you. I know you work for the U. P. in Cheyenne. But to be regular I suppose I ought to stay."

"You can't work day and night," reminded Darby. "You know what I claim to be. Still I'm a stranger. We'll find Nate Boswell. He'll vouch for me. Then you can go home and sleep sound."

"I'll do that; just to be regular," agreed the agent. "But you stay here. I don't want to leave the place unguarded. Still. . . ."

Darby gave a short laugh. "You're thinking you might as well leave me all night as for the better part of an hour, eh?"

"I'm ashamed. But I must be regular. I reckon you'll be all right—"

"No. You stay here and I'll fetch Boswell to you," insisted Darby. And without waiting for further words he hastened up street and soon located Boswell in a gun-store. He briefly explained his errand and described the killing, which Boswell already had heard about, and stressed the fact that the Kid and not Gorl had committed the murder.

They hurried back to the express office and Boswell solemnly vouched for Darby and added, "You can trust him with anything."

The agent breathed in deep relief and muttered apologies. He next said, "Perhaps you won't relish your job so much when I tell you there's some twenty thousand dollars inside for the U. P. paymaster. Came in late this afternoon."

"Makes it more interesting. Open up. Don't strike a light. Find me some blankets. Then trot home to your wife," Darby curtly told him.

The agent felt his way to the corner where the watchman had kept his pallet of buffalo robes and blankets, while Boswell waited in the doorway. "You won't have any trouble. No one knows about the stuff coming in. I'm awfully obliged to you. I'll be down early in the morning. Good night."

NOR did Darby then anticipate any trouble. Being employed to guard railroad property he felt an interest in express property. And the small shanty was as comfortable as the division engineer's small tent. He threw off most of his clothing and went to bed with the Navy revolver on the floor beside him. Two hours after midnight he found himself wide awake. He reached out and picked up the gun and pricked his ears to locate the cause of his awakening. A slight noise by the window and a current of cool air told him the window had been unfastened and raised. Doubtless it was the raising of the window that had aroused him.

Now he was making out a figure at the opening and believed a man was throwing his leg over the sill.

"Who's there?" he suddenly cried.

Almost instantly a gun exploded, the heavy ball striking the floor near the head of his resting place. He immediately began shooting. He heard a sharp scream of pain, and a deep oath. He rolled across the room to the end of the short counter and fumbled about in the darkness for some better weapon than a clubbed revolver. The sound of retreating steps informed him the prowlers had fled.

Hastily dressing he reconnoitered from the window and his hand was wet as he removed it from the sill. Finding the lamp he placed it on the floor under the counter and lighted it, and reloaded his gun. Then, extinguishing the light, he seated himself with his back to the wall between the window and door and waited for day. He knew he had hit a man as there was blood on his hand when he was recharging his revolver.

After the light began to lighten the room he believed there was no further danger and he dropped asleep. This time he was awakened by someone at the window exclaiming in horror, "Killed him and got the sack! Dragged him out the window. Here's his blood—"

Darby came to his feet and stepped to the window and met the amazed stare of the express agent and a citizen. "Good land! You're alive!" yelled the agent.

"Yes. Had visitors. No harm done to me, or the money. Think they thought the place was unguarded. Woke me by shoving up the window. We exchanged quite a few shots. I hit one of them." And he nodded to the dark stains on the sill. "Come inside."

He unbarred the door and stepped out. The agent and his companion were effusive in their praise. The agent remarked, "If I could leave here I'd hunt around and find out who's been wounded overnight."

"Probably several were hurt last night. Usually that many in Cheyenne. I'll look around and if I learn anything I'll come back and tell you. I'm pulling out today." Without waiting for further thanks he hastened to Moore's place and ordered something to eat.

The proprietor eyed him blankly while the assistant brought in the breakfast. As he commenced eating, the door of the back room opened and for a moment the Kid stood in the doorway, resting heavily on an improvised cane. It was barely a glimpse before the Kid stepped back and the door closed.

Darby glanced up at Moore and remarked, "Young fellow hurt his leg?"

"Greaser knifed him through the calf in a game last night."

"Any new killings?"

"Man shot in here last night. Drunk. Tried to kill a man. T'other feller beat him to the draw."

"Yes. I saw that. But the man who pulled the trigger was the small chap that just stood in the door. The Kid."

"What'n hell you bleating about?" roared Moore. "Man who did the shooting is a big feller. Named Gorl."

"I know him well," quietly said Darby. "The gun was cocked in his hand. The Kid reached forward and fired it. I saw it."

Moore stared at him curiously. Finally he said, "Stranger until you're named court and jury, don't see too much."

"I've seen enough," shortly replied Darby. "But I'll testify in any people's court that the Kid did the shooting."

"Say! Who might you be, anyway?"

Darby gave his name and told the nature of his employment. The proprietor was impressed and changed his tone. "Sort of a detective for the U. P. I take it," he mumbled. "Well, everyone along the line knows I'm friendly to the railroad. I want to see it go through and make this country prosperous. If you say you saw that, then your word goes. But you don't have to stay here as a witness. The Kid can't run away with that knife-stab in his leg."

"Anyone else wounded in town last night?"

"What a question! Probably a dozen. Someone hurt, knifed or shot, every night."

"Didn't know but it might be the Kid I shot last night. I hit someone trying to break into the express office. Had a leg over the window sill. Blood on the sill."

The bartender dropped a glass he was polishing. The proprietor rubbed his chin. "The Kid was playing poker till early this morning, when he was knifed," he slowly informed. "I didn't know you'd taken on the watchman's job."

"For last night only. Quite a bit of money in the office. It's been moved by this time."

He was quick to detect the mighty effort the man was making to conceal a sudden spasm of rage. All he said was, "You're a good watchman. It wouldn't matter if someone killed the Kid. Small loss here. Reckon he'd steal if he got a chance. But it happens he wasn't near any express office last night. Here comes Gorl now. Ought to be in bed. Up all night."

The Easterner, entering from the street, halted on beholding Darby. He was sober but weak and physically sick. Soul-sick, Darby surmised. His big head hung low. With scarcely a glance at Moore he slowly advanced to Darby's table and called for a whisky. After he was served he muttered:

"You were right, Lee. I'm a fool. But it's too late now. Of course you heard about last night."

Darby waited. In a broken voice Gorl continued, "Drunk. Got into a jawing match with a man. They say we drew our guns together. I killed him."

Darby told him, and without lowering his voice, "You must have been very drunk, Allan, to have such notions. I saw it all. You did draw and cock your gun. Other man did the same. Then you two stood and stared at each other, neither wanting to shoot. The Kid reached forward and grabbed your pistol-hand and pulled the trigger."

The big head was jerked up. The somber eyes were lighted with thankfulness. He extended a trembling hand to clasp Darby's wrist, and in an unsteady voice he cried, "You saw that? But they said I did it. They've been praising me. Praise! For killing a strange man I had nothing against. Darby you've lifted me out of hell."

"You've had a narrow escape from wounding your conscience beyond curing. Haven't you had about enough?"

Gorl's head sank. Lowering his voice that the man at the bar might not hear him, he whispered, "How can I get out of it? Cheyenne is closed to me. I've spoiled myself for big work. I can't do small jobs."

"What's that to do with you behaving yourself here?"

"I've trailed with Keen and his gang. If I tried to throw them over they'd do for me."

Darby pondered the big man's predicament. He remembered the dead man out on the prairie. There was no doubting some deadly agency was working along some horrible plan in Laramie City. Gorl's life wouldn't be safe until he broke with Keen. Finally he told the Easterner, "They never would bother with you unless they believed sometime they would get money from you, or make money by using you. Watch yourself. Don't be led into things, but don't have any rows with the Elder. I'm starting for Cheyenne today, and I'll talk with the vigilantes and see if it can't be fixed so you can come back."

"If they'll give me a clean bill of health I'll return and behave myself," Gorl eagerly assured. "But I can't see any sense in the Kid firing my gun."

"No point to it unless they wanted to fasten a killing on you, so you'd find there was no turning back," mused Darby. "This place we're in now is a good one to keep clear of. Deviltry is hatched up in that back room. Dead man found two miles out. Half eaten by coyotes."

"You don't mean Asa's mixed up in any such works?"

"Someone is mixed up in it. I believe this place is rightly named. Bucket of Blood. When someone hauls dead men from town in a cart, it shows a well organized plan for butchery. You be careful. I'm starting for Cheyenne at once. I'll get word to you if it's all right for you to come back."

"Wish I could go with you," sighed Gorl. "Of course I have a favor to ask." Darby nodded. "See Dollie. Tell her I'm sorry. That's all."

"I'll not deliver any such hopeless message. If you want me to tell her you are bucking up and intend to live as you should, all right."

"Tell her that. But I haven't an idea how I can pull out of it. I'm scared, Darby. Never felt that way before. Always believed I could keep on, or quit. Now I'm hemmed in. Not scared of death, mind you. That wouldn't matter so much. But I'm like a man who's whipped a team of horses to make them gallop and finds they're running away with him. It eases me to know I didn't kill that poor man. But why did the Kid do it? Why does Keen insist I did it?" In a sudden climax of helpless rage he hissed, "I'll do for Keen if it comes to a showdown."

"And be killed before you could get started. Why not go back East?"

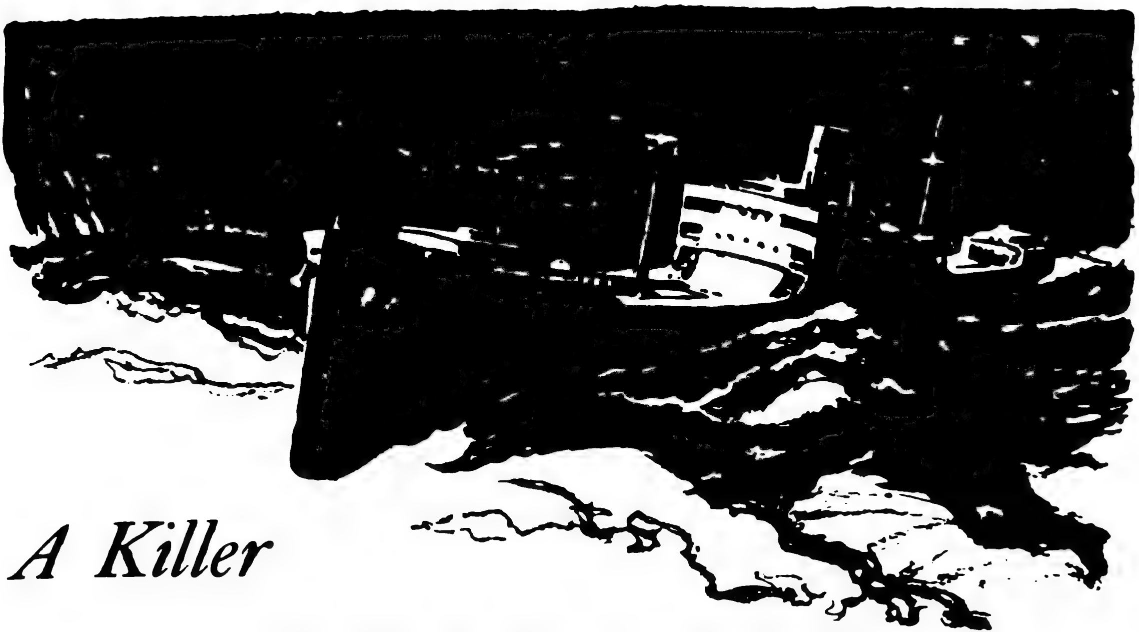
Gorl glared at him wrathfully. "Go back East?" he jeered. "Be pointed at. Looked down on, where I stood high?"

"Then stand up for what's decent and clean, even if they kill you," impatiently advised Darby.

"They'll kill me, never doubt," was the spiritless reply. "If they haul me up for killing the watchman, you'll come and testify?"

"Of course. Before I go I'll spread the truth among the business men. But don't draw a gun again while drunk."

In the next issue, Baltimore's heyoka dream begins its curious and grim fulfillment.



A Killer and the Judgment of the Sea

ORDEAL

By MILLARD WARD

JOE lay braced uncomfortably in his bunk at the after-end of the forecastle. It was a 'thwartship's bunk and the *Regulus* was rolling heavily. One moment Joe was half standing up and the next the whole weight of his body came crowding down on his neck. Even the thin straw mattress under him shifted back and forth on the sagging spring. The coarse blue sheet and woody blankets felt damp and clammy, though warm enough. The blue curtain that hung on a taut cord across the front of the bunk was drawn back eight or ten inches from one end, so that, as he lay flat on his back with his head turned to one side, Joe could watch the forecastle door.

A single electric bulb in the middle of the roof shone faintly through its coating of blue paint, but Joe's eyes were so accustomed to the dimness that he could make out even small details of the room. Four bunks in double tier covered each of the fore and aft bulkheads. The after-end, which narrowed with the curve of the ship's stern until it was barely six feet wide, held Joe's bunk and the one above him. These, with a row of green-painted metal lockers and two wooden benches, at present tumbled over on their sides, were all the furniture.

Joe's eyes shifted to the forward one of the two upper bunks on the outboard side of the forecastle. It was just beneath a port-hole, in easy reach of the lockers and generally considered the best of the ten. It was empty now, the bright, flowered curtain hauled back and the blankets tumbled in a heap at the foot. The very flamboyance of that curtain in the rows of dull blue showed something of the character of its owner. The bunk was not rightfully his. It had happened the day they joined the ship.

There was a miners' strike in Great Britain and the *Regulus* had been one of the American ships, lying idle for lack of cargoes, which was hastily chartered for a single trip with coal. Everybody, from captain to mess boy, was new on board.

Joe had been first in the forecastle after signing on, and had picked that forward bunk for his own, tossing his sea bag and overcoat into it as claim stakes. When he returned from the wash-room, however, he had found his bag and coat lying on the floor and the bunk taken by a young, thick-shouldered fellow with curly red hair and a one-sided grin. The only reply he had made to Joe's protests was a monotonously repeated offer to fight. Joe was past forty and weighed a hundred and thirty pounds, so the other man had kept the bunk. That was Paddy, who had occupied it ever since. The only bunk left for Joe was the worst in the forecastle, and he had occupied that ever since.

The oilskins on the forward bulkhead leaned over almost forty-five degrees and the deck rose in a sickening lunge that brought the propeller to the surface, its sudden racing shaking the whole forecastle. At the same time a sea bumped against the closed doors of the booby hatch and Joe could hear water trickling down the ladder. He lay for a while, eyes wide open and muscles tense.

Later on, when the *Regulus* reached Liverpool, there had been a girl, too. She was small and blonde and quiet and had seemed to like Joe at first. He had bought her some Bass and Guinness and taken her to the cinema a few times, an amazing tenderness growing out of it. Then Paddy had come along, a splendid animal in many ways, and the girl had giggled and gone off with him. The whole forecastle knew, having been told many times, how Paddy treated any girl who went with him.

On the homeward passage he had managed to keep out of Paddy's way until that very night. A poker game had started in the mess-room after supper, small because they were homeward bound and nobody had any money to speak of. Joe had a few dollars left, because when he lost his girl in Liverpool he had stopped going ashore; but he was the only one. The rest were staking odd six-pences and packs of cigarets.

It had been lazy and good natured for a while, then Paddy came in and demanded a hand. No one in that crew liked to refuse Paddy anything. He played hard, bluffing as though hundreds of dollars were at stake, harshly insistent upon minor points of the rules, and succeeded in pretty well ruining the game. Also, he won everything in sight, including Joe's last penny. When everybody was broke he laughed boisterously, leaned back in his seat behind a low wall of cigarets and small change, and showed them how he could place the cards wherever he wanted. There was the usual uncertain laughter that followed Paddy's jokes, but Joe sat still on the opposite side of the table, breathing quickly.

Paddy leered across at him. "Still hangin' around, are ye? Should think, after me gittin' yer bunk and yer money, yuh'd have enough sense to keep out o' my way. Oh, yes, and I fergot—" Paddy laughed unpleasantly— "I got yer girl, too, didn't I, spick? She was all right fer a short time but a dirty little— Oh, ye're gittin' bad, are yuh?"

Joe had drawn himself to his feet, gripping the table with white-knuckled hands, his lips writhing. Paddy looked him over mockingly.

"Yes, sir, yuh sure are gittin' bad. My, my, just think o' that." Some of the bitter contempt in the little man's eyes must have penetrated his thick skin, for his face darkened suddenly.

"I'll take it out o' yuh!"

The first plunge carried him almost across the table, his hands aimed for Joe's throat. Joe threw himself backward, tripped over the bench and landed on the floor. He was up again in an instant, and by the time Paddy was clear of the table, had snatched the thin-bladed bread knife from the messman's locker and retreated into a forward corner. He crouched there, hissing like a cat.

Paddy hesitated and studied him with a nasty light in his eyes. The other men had jumped out of the way and were watching from the forecastle door, but there was no more laughter.

All at once Paddy relaxed and grinned naturally. "Hell, Joe, what's a use us fightin' just to please them rats? Yuh made me sore fer a minute but I'm over it now. I'm sorry I said what I did. A man can't speak no fairer than dat, can he? I was just kiddin' about yer money, too. I'll give it back to yuh. Here."

He pulled out a small wad of crumpled greenbacks and stepped forward, smiling.

Joe still glared suspiciously but the hand holding the knife drooped ever so little, Paddy took another step forward.

"I don' lak," Joe complained hoarsely. "Don' you——"

There was a sharp slap as Paddy's hand closed over the little man's wrist, forcing the knife aside, then his fist took him squarely in the face. The knife clattered under the table and Joe went down in a heap, bloody and gasping and sick.

"Yuh dam' dago. Knife me, will yuh!" Paddy began kicking viciously at his ribs as he lay on the floor, but three or four of the others collected enough courage among them to pull him away.

A SAILOR had been aft to call the watch a little while before, and now someone told Paddy it was five minutes of twelve. He had to hurry to get into his sea boots and oilskin in time to take the first lookout. Joe pulled himself to a sitting position and leaned back against the bulkhead while Paddy was getting clear. The little man licked his smashed lips constantly and stared at the floor. The others drifted silently into the forecastle after Paddy went clumping up the ladder, and Joe was left alone. He worked all day and consequently had no night watch to stand.

There was a narrow passageway running across the ship between the mess-room and forecastle. At one end of it was the open door of the small stateroom shared by the boatswain and carpenter. A light was burning in this passage and from his place in the mess-room Joe could see a corner of the boatswain's settee. A ball of sail twine was lying there and in the crack between back and seat a bright, new marlinspike.

Joe stared at the spike for a long time. It was a murderous-looking tool, eighteen inches from butt to point, sharp as a rapier. It was heavy, too, and would balance nicely in the hand. Joe got up and sidled noiselessly down the passage.

A little later he was in his bunk in the forecastle, the marlinspike lying thin and cool at his side. He had been there for almost two hours now. His cut mouth had stiffened and was not very painful unless he moved it. He was waiting for Paddy to come aft to read the log at two o'clock. There had been no sun for observations for two days and the log was read twice a watch. Joe knew about that and he knew also that Paddy would slip down to the mess-room for a smoke before reading it. When he went back on deck Joe would follow him.

While he was waiting, Joe had wrapped the butt of the spike in an old undershirt and tied it with a rope yarn. It was almost as good as a blackjack. One solid rap on the head would put Paddy down for the count and go a long way toward evening the score between them. Even if Paddy suspected who did it, he wouldn't be good for much for a day or two, and the trip was almost over. Beneath the gray blankets Joe was warmly dressed but barefooted. It was almost two o'clock.

Then, distinctly, he heard the wash of a sea across the afterdeck. Someone had opened the companion door and was coming down the ladder. A man entered the forecastle and crossed to the bunk with the flowered curtain. He fumbled in a canvas pocket at its head and brought out a cigaret. The yellow flare of the match showed Paddy's strong face, crimson with wind and spray, bending over it intently. The match went out and the shadowy figure moved to the door, leaving a faint, warm smell of smoke behind him. Joe heard the slight scrape of a bench in the mess-room, then for several minutes there was only the uneasy creaking of the ship and the rustle of the oilskins on the forward bulkhead.

Behind the dingy blue curtain of his bunk, Joe threw back the blankets, freeing his legs, and picked up the marlinspike. He ran his hands over its full length, caressingly.

When Paddy left the mess-room and started back up the ladder, Joe was out of the bunk and after him like a cat. The companion ladder was steel, very steep, and Joe had to wait until Paddy was off it before starting up. Once under way, however, he came so swiftly that he gained the deck only a few feet behind the other man.

With ,the door of the companionway closed behind him, Joe felt the wind for the first time and set his teeth. It was a level, bitter gale that cut through his clothes like acid. Waves were slashing across the deck at the number three hatch, spray carrying aft on the wind in stinging volleys. The wooden planks under foot were wet and slippery.

Paddy went aft toward the taffrail, his body swaying with the ship. He had brought the big, three-celled flashlight from the bridge, and as soon as he left the shelter of the companionway he snapped it on, the circle of light wavering thinly over the black deck. The patent log, a small clocklike affair, was fixed to the taffrail on the lee quarter, the long white line leading out into the water astern.

There was hardly two yards of space between the men, Joe silent, intent, holding the marlinspike by the middle. The white rays of Paddy's flashlight settled on the dial of the log and at the same time the naked point of Joe's marlinspike clicked loudly against an invisible ventilator. Paddy whirled, his body more formidable than ever in stiff oilskin, and the light glared in Joe's eyes. The marlinspike was plainly visible.

"What th' hell!" It was a startled bellow. "Yuh dirty spick, I'll fix yuh!"

The big body lurched forward ferociously, and with a squealing snarl Joe sprang to meet it. The flashlight swung aloft, sweeping the low, black clouds for an instant, then clattered to the deck and went out. The shock of collision was over and Joe was shrinking back step by step. The grotesque blot of Paddy's figure was on hands and knees by the rail, sinking slowly forward, choking. The flat point of the marlinspike showed through the back collar of his oilskin. It had pierced his throat like a needle. Joe stopped ten feet away, empty handed, his eyes wide with horror.

"Get up, Paddy, you devil," he hissed. "Don' mak' out you keel. I nevair try to keel you."

Paddy's arms and legs folded up suddenly, dropping him flat on his face, and the little man crept back again stiffly.

"Paddy, get up. I don' keel you. Fo' God's sake, get up now!"

Paddy did not get up. The furthest wash of a ninth wave slapped about Joe's feet and into the face of the man on deck. Joe knelt beside him with clenched teeth. Paddy's head had turned to one side and the white blur of his face was visible.

Joe heard his voice for an instant, bubbling, inhuman.

"Yuh lousy spick, I'll—" Then Paddy choked with blood and died.

JOE knew he was dead or he would have finished what he was saying. Joe knew he had only a little time and his mind became strangely clear and keen. The darkness moaned constantly with wind and boarding seas and the ship staggered on with great swooping lunges. It was bad enough amidships to carry a man overboard if it hit him just right. Joe reached down suddenly, pulled the spike from Paddy's throat with a single hard yank and washed it carefully in the sea water that still flooded the scupper channel. The broken flashlight was tumbling back and forth in the scuppers and he retrieved that, too. Then he rolled Paddy over once or twice and stuffed him through the rail into the sea. He could barely hear the dull plunge.

A gust of wind carried the sound of four bells aft clearly and Joe knew someone would come to look for Paddy in a few minutes.

A particularly heavy sea swept across the deck and the little man darted forward in the very backwash to the lee rail opposite the mainmast. There he dropped the flashlight into the scuppers, where it might have fallen when Paddy was carried overboard, and ran aft again. He was half caught by another sea and drenched to the waist, but he was glad of that because the wave inundated the whole deck and would wash away any signs of blood.

Joe paused at the head of the companion ladder to squeeze the worst of the water out of his clothes. Then he slipped below, replaced the spike on the boatswain's settee, and went back to his bunk without making a sound. The forecastle was dim and silent and full of breathing.

Behind the blue curtain he stripped off his wet clothes and tied them in a bundle. After replacing them with dry underwear, he climbed out on the floor again. The port-hole above Paddy's bunk was tight shut and occasionally flooded with water, but Joe judged matters so that he got the bundle through it without either drowning or waking anyone. He did not know whether there were any bloodstains on the clothes or not but he wished, as far as possible, to avoid taking chances.

When he was under his blankets again, warm, dry and safe, he began to be sick at the stomach. There was a ball of ice inside him that changed presently to a nest of frightened rabbits and he clenched his teeth and shivered. The ship heeled far over and an empty bucket on the floor slipped against one of the overturned benches with a slight clang. Unreasoning fear ran through Joe's veins like a flood of cold sand, and his body twitched convulsively.

It was better, however, in the quiet that followed, and by the time Carlsen, who was Paddy's watchmate, came into the forecastle and looked curiously about, he was able to feign sleep convincingly. Carlsen stayed only a few seconds and made no noise in leaving.

Fifteen minutes later Carlsen returned with Captain Chenoweth, a slim, dark, youngish man who seemed both worried and irritated. He stood and stared glumly at Paddy's bunk, then made a round of the forecastle and went out, taking Carlsen with him.

The skipper was all right, Joe remembered; minded his own business and let the mate and boatswain handle the crew. Joe relaxed a bit in his bunk. If nothing else made a noise he thought he might presently be able to get to sleep.

II

EARLY the following morning Mr. William Johnson, chief engineer of the *Regulus,* lurched through the door into Captain Chenoweth's cabin on the lower bridge and dropped into a leather-cushioned chair. The deck canted over immediately, so that he braced his feet and gripped the stout oak arms. A pile of books slid from the top of the captain's desk to the floor with a series of sharp slaps, while the bright green curtains at the door and port-holes leaned in graceful unison to starboard.

The ship came back staggeringly to an even keel, and steadied for a moment. When she rolled again there was a glimpse of the sea through the starboard port-holes, dull gray mountains with racing crests of white and sides arroyoed with pale, vicious wind streaks. A haze of blown spray hung over the surface and the sky was dark as slate and lowering.

Captain Chenoweth stood in the middle of the cabin, legs wide and body balanced carefully against the motion of the ship. He was in full uniform, wide blue trousers and double-breasted jacket with brass buttons and four rings of gold braid on each sleeve. His feet were lost in rolled-down hip-boots, the loose, black tops hanging rakishly about his calves. His blue-topped badge cap, with the line of gold oak leaves across the visor, lay in a corner of the settee beside a southwester and oilskin coat which still gleamed with moisture.

Johnson's clothes were blue, also, but of civilian origin, shiny in spots and without brass buttons. His uniform cap was amazingly crumpled and stained with oil.

"Doggone!" the engineer exclaimed cheerfully as the ship wallowed over again. "This is some different from the San Lorenzo run, ain't it?"

The captain thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets and teetered back on his heels.

"You know why I sent for you, Bill?"

"Nope, unless you're looking for a game of acey-ducey."

Chenoweth's mouth drew into a thin line. "I only wish I was, but the fact is we lost a man overboard last night and I don't savvy everything about it."

"The hell we did!" The lightness was wiped out of Bill's voice abruptly. "Who?"

"Able seaman name of O'Brien. Paddy they called him. Second mate turned me out at quarter past two this morning. Said O'Brien had gone aft to read the log between lookout and wheel and failed to show up again. Mr. Fitzgerald took the wheel himself and sent the other man aft to look for him, but the fellow couldn't find him and Fitzgerald called me.

"I went aft myself and had a look but there was nothing doing. O'Brien was clean gone. Seas were coming over the afterdeck pretty lively but they didn't look bad enough to get a good seaman like him. We found his flashlight, though, lying broken in the scupper channel opposite number three hatch."

The captain paused, frowning to himself, and Bill looked up keenly. "You reckon somebody helped him overboard, Duke?"

"That's what's in my mind, though I haven't mentioned it to anyone else. I remember him well, a Liverpool Irishman and a mighty hard case. Fitzgerald says he and his watchmate, Carlsen, never spoke to each other."

"Couldn't have been Carlsen," put in Bill flatly. "He was at the wheel all the time."

"No, it wasn't Carlsen. He's a big fellow, anyway, and not the type to go in for murder."

"What'd this Paddy look like, Duke?

can't seem to recall him at all, myself."

"Homely red-headed brute," replied Chenoweth abstractedly. "Weighed around a hundred and eighty, I'd say. Blue eyes and fair skin. As a matter of fact, Bill, he looked a good bit like you."

"Wait a minute," broke in the engineer truculently, "before we go any further. He was a homely red-headed brute and he looked a good bit like me, did he?"

"No, no," emended the captain hastily. "What I meant to say was, he was a fine, upstanding, auburn-haired figure of a man. But he was your general type."

"Hum," said Bill. "We'll let it go at that. Did you question the rest of the crew?"

"Yes, sure. First thing this morning. All tighter'n clams. Nobody'd seen him. That little day man they call Joe, the one with the black mustache, had his mouth all busted up, but he claimed the end of a wire rope slipped off its reel and hit him. There were damn few tears being shed for Paddy while I was in the fo'c's'le."

Bill pulled himself to his feet. "I got to get below. Naturally I can't help you any right now, but I'll keep my eyes and ears open. Who'd the mate put on the mid-watch in place of Paddy?"

"That little fellow I just spoke of, Joe something or other."

"Hum. Well, it'd be a hell of a record for our first big ship if somebody got away with murder in it."

Chenoweth nodded without replying and Bill stepped over the raised door sill and went down the inside ladder to the saloon.

The captain dragged on his oilskin again and returned to the bridge, for the gale was not decreasing and fog was rising in clammy, white banks ahead.

ALL that day the *Regulus* butted sturdily along. She was a wide-beamed, flush-decked vessel of eighty-eight hundred dead weight tons. Heavily laden with an unexpected return cargo from Glasgow, she weathered the gale about as gracefully as a water-logged barrel, but quite as effectively. She cut into the edge of the Gulf Stream toward evening, finding there markedly lower wind and sea but no break in the fog. It was thick as cotton wool, soft and smothering and crowding in a moist ring about the big freighter until she might almost have been a toy ship in a vast, white bottle.

The steam whistle sounded at regular, two-minute intervals, a dismal, long-drawn bellowing that hung and quivered above the fog-drenched deck. No other signals were heard, but Captain Chenoweth remained on the bridge, taking his meals from a tray, his rest, propped against a corner of the chart table.

Carlsen had the wheel from twelve o'clock until two and Joe from two to four. The captain watched them both covertly but found nothing remarkable in the manner of either. Joe flinched from the fog whistle once or twice when it caught him napping, but anyone is likely to do that, particularly when it has been going a long time already.

Nothing happened, beyond the troublesome routine of managing a ship in thick weather, until one bell in the middle watch that night. Then Captain Chenoweth sent word to the chief engineer to borrow an oil coat and come up to the bridge in a hurry.

Bill arrived five minutes later to find the captain standing close to the forward rail on the lee wing with his binoculars leveled over the narrow canvas dodger. The *Regulus* was rolling easily and her decks were almost free from salt water. The fog, too, seemed to be lifting, haloing the white range lights only thinly, but visibility was still bad and inside the dark pilot-house Mr. Fitzgerald kept his place at the whistle lanyard. It had been going for over sixteen hours without a break.

Bill Johnson could see the officer dimly through the glass in the pilot-house door, one elbow resting on the engine room telegraph, his nose pressed against a forward window. Fitzgerald's hand came down slowly and a white plume of steam broke out from the stack behind them. In the midst of the roar that followed, Captain Chenoweth reached out and caught Bill's elbow in a hard grasp.

"Look! Quick! The fo'c's'le-head!"

He forced the glasses into the engineer's hands and pointed forward. The deck was almost clear of fog and Bill found that he could make out the forecastle-head plainly, ventilators, white-painted rail and dark bulk of windlass. Also he found with a startled grunt that he could see a man, outlined against the light buff plates in the extreme bow, crouching low on the deck. As the sound of the whistle died away in a long, echoing moan, the man shrank back convulsively. His hands were pressed tight over his ears and the white blur of his face turned aft. In the brief silence between whistles he stayed cowering on deck, and Bill could see him raise his hands to his ears again an instant before the next blast.

"Must be watchin' for the jet of steam," muttered the engineer aloud. "Somebody is shell shocked proper."

"That's that fellow Joe," whispered the captain excitedly. "Didn't want to go on lookout at all. Claimed he was sick. Pulse was fluttery, all right, but his temperature was normal and his tongue was red as a dog's, so the mate made him go. He's been getting worse and worse scared ever since twelve o'clock. Hell, I've been shipmates with a fog whistle for six days straight and never saw anybody lose their nerve like that."

"Nor me," replied the engineer slowly. "It was this same watch last night when Paddy went overboard, wasn't it? You see any connection, Duke?"

Chenoweth chewed his under lip viciously. "Don't know. Wonder if there was any trouble between him and Paddy."

"Well, he's got that busted mouth; but in a fight he wouldn't have stood a chance with Paddy. I couldn't get any dope from the black gang. They all know how to keep their mushes shut back there."

Chenoweth went out to the extreme end of the bridge and stood a moment, looking up at the sky. There were some very faint blurs of gray in the clouds overhead, where the moon should have been, and near the western horizon a star peeped out brightly.

"It's damn near time!" He returned to the pilot-house, and opened the door. "Never mind that whistle any more, Mr. Fitzgerald. Fog's cleared away."

Chenoweth remained with Bill on the wing of the bridge. The lengthening silence seemed unfamiliar and ghostly. The captain took the glasses and fixed them on the forecastle-head again. After a minute he lowered them carelessly and replaced them in their box on the rail of the bridge.

"Seems to be all right. He's up now and facing forward like a lookout should. Damn funny business!"

Bill Johnson rubbed his fingers gently over the stubble on his chin. "I got an idea, Duke. Probably no good but tell me what you think of it, anyway."

"Shoot."

The engineer went on in a low, faintly deprecating voice, Chenoweth listening with attention. When he finished, the captain nodded shortly, his face hard.

"Worth a shot, Bill. If you can do your part I can do mine. There's a light Jacob's-ladder in the afterpeak and we can rig some hooks out from the side to catch the seaweed. Plenty of it around now we're in the Stream. Got more than an hour to get ready."

"Right. Meet me in my room in a couple of minutes, will you?"

The engineer turned and swung down the port ladder, disappearing almost immediately in the darkness.

Chenoweth thrust his head into the pilot-house. The second mate, he found, was back at the forward windows, his face drawn and expressionless in the manner of those who keep the middle watch.

"Going below now, Mr. Fitzgerald. If it gets thick or comes on to blow very hard, give me a call."

"Very well, sir. Good night, sir."

"Good night."

Chenoweth closed the door carefully behind him and followed the engineer down the outside ladder.

ON THE dark forecastle-head Joe began tramping back and forth across the narrow strip of deck forward of the windlass. He was still hollow and quiet from the agony of the whistle but was gradually getting hold of himself again. The last twenty-four hours had not been pleasant. Besides the whistle there had been the memory of Paddy's face, distorted and blotched darkly with blood. As long as he kept moving, and the whistle remained silent, he was able to think and steady himself. The *Regulus* was due at Cape Henry late the next day and once on shore he could forget. It was only a question of getting by for a few more watches.

The big ship plowed on through the warm swells of the Gulf Stream, sinking into the great cushions of water with hissing sighs of contentment and seeming to stretch lazily as she rolled. The storm was entirely over.

The watch dragged on. Joe struck two bells, then, after an eternity, three. The range and running lights glowed softly above the deck and it was very quiet.

At last the thin note of the second mate's whistle carried to the forecastle-head and Joe tramped aft to answer it. When he reached the bridge he found Mr. Fitzgerald standing at the head of the ladder.

"Read the log," said the second mate briefly.

"Read de log, sir," Joe repeated. He found a new flashlight in the box on the rail, took it and went below again.

The afterdeck, as he came out of the lighted alleyway amidships, seemed very black and lonesome, but he lowered his head and went on. The idea of visiting the very place where Paddy had died did not attract him, but the second mate had told him to read the log, and Fitzgerald, though not a bucko type, could be very nasty if disobeyed.

When Joe passed the foot of the mainmast all lights were left behind him and he walked more carefully, following the shadowy line of the number four hatch-coaming. Just before he reached the wooden deck at the stern something broad and white flashed out of the darkness into his very eyes. It soared up again and vanished with a harsh wail, leaving Joe recoiled against the hatch.

"Sea gull," he mumbled shakily. "Sea gull. Eet ees not'ing to fear."

He went on after a moment toward the taffrail, picking his way between a row of ventilators and the long, white box of the hand steering-gear. The rays of the flashlight felt along the rail to the dial of the patent log.

Joe leaned over to mark the position of the hands, then sprang back with a wordless, gurgling cry. Full in the circle of light an oilskinned figure was rising out of the black pit over the side, a tall, broad thing with streamers of dripping seaweed trailing from it. The face was a ghastly bluish-white with a long smear of red down one side. The hair, showing beneath the drenched southwester, was red, too, and draggled.

Joe half turned and crumpled to the deck, the flashlight glowing rosily under his hand. The thing rolled stiffly over the rail and began a slow, crouching advance.

"Paddy!" It was a strangled howl rather than a word. Joe writhed on the water-soaked planks. "Go back! I nevair try to keel you. You mak' me do eet. I try to hit you, nevair keel. I nevair try—Paddy— Oh, Dios!"

The little man sprang up, his lips frothing, as the thing stretched out its big, dead, white hands, then he collapsed again and lay motionless at the foot of a ventilator.

The thing straightened up and tore off its rank-smelling drapery of seaweed.

"Hey, Duke," it called anxiously. "This feller's passed out."

Captain Chenoweth came crawling from beneath the overhang of the wheelbox. "He said enough, though. He's the one did it."

Bill leaned down, hauled in a light Jacob's-ladder that had been dangling over the side and dumped it carelessly on deck.

"I'm kind of surprised that any scheme of mine should work, but it looks like this one has. I heard him, too, of course."

He slipped a loop of sail twine off his thumb and let it trail away on the breeze. "It was your idea, though, to signal me when to come up by pulling that string. Psychological moment, all right. We better haul this feller below and bring him around."

In the light and warmth of the deserted seamen's mess Joe recovered slowly. Chenoweth poured water over his face and later gave him hot coffee from the steam urn. Bill stayed out of the way at first to avoid startling him with his painted face. When he did appear, Joe was no longer frightened, but stunned and silent.

Chenoweth made no move toward any violence and presently the sailor began to talk. Haltingly, in broken, uncertain English, the whole story came out; from the stolen bunk, through the affairs of the girl and the poker game, on to the collision on the afterdeck when the marlinspike went out, wrong end foremost.

Chenoweth and Bill sat side by side on one of the rough benches, listening. When Joe finished, the captain rose to his feet.

"If you've got witnesses for the first part of that, and no doubt you have, you won't be so bad off. Second degree's about the worst they'll give you and you may even draw a manslaughter. Won't get any more than ten years. Meantime I'm goin' to lock you up."

"Where?" inquired Bill glumly.

"Afterpeak. Got an iron door but plenty of light and air. He can take his donkey's breakfast in with him. Won't be there long anyway. We'll have to hand him over soon as we get in."

"I reckon we will," grunted the engineer. "Well, let's get it over with then. I know it was my own scheme but I've had most enough for one night."

The afterpeak in which Joe was established, silent and unresisting, was in the extreme stern of the ship, a low-ceilinged room, its after bulkhead curving sharply. It was used as a secondary storeroom, a good deal of seldom-used ship's gear being piled in the wings; rusty wires, old canvas, storm staysails, broken cluster lights and odds and ends of all sorts. It had one fair-sized ventilator and two port-holes, unusually large for belowdecks.

Bill Johnson brought Joe's mattress and blankets from the forecastle and then went away with the captain, the heavy door clanging dully behind them. Chenoweth took the key.

They tramped forward through the darkness and parted at the door of the chief engineer's room.

TOWARD eight o'clock the following morning Captain Chenoweth rapped sharply at the chief's door, and, without waiting for an answer, entered. Bill Johnson struggled to a sitting position in the berth.

"What's up, skipper?"

"Just been back to see the prisoner," Chenoweth replied briefly. "He's gone."

"Gone!" The engineer swung his legs out of the berth and stared. "Where the hell's he gone to?"

"Overboard, I suppose. When I unlocked the door and went in I found the starboard port-hole open and no sign of Joe. Couldn't be hiding. No place to hide. Couldn't have got out. That place is half a strong room and I know there's no other key."

Bill whistled softly, his eyes grave. "Gosh, I didn't realize he was small enough to get through a port. Suicide, huh?"

Chenoweth sank wearily into Bill's only chair. "I'm not so sure. I've been doing some looking around back there. There's a stack of old life-preservers in one corner, stowed there when the ship got the new ones with the jacket arrangement. Inventory the mate made of that junk a couple of weeks ago says twelve life-belts. I counted the stack three times and couldn't make more than eleven."

"Think he'd stand any chance of getting to shore if he did have a life-preserver?"

"Not a prayer. We're over a hundred miles out right now and he probably went over hours ago. Current setting offshore hard, too."

"Any use going back to look for him?"

Chenoweth's lips twitched. "Can't see any. He's probably fifty miles from us now. We changed course at four o'clock and the current and wind have to be figured on. Pure waste of time, I'm afraid."

"Reckon that's right. Just have to report him and Paddy both lost."

"Ought to report about that life-belt, too, I suppose. If anybody picks him up floatin' around out there they can turn him over to the cops. Three ships passed us this morning close to, all foreigners outward bound."

Bill sat quiet on the edge of his berth, the sun which had just broken through the clouds outside gilding his bare shoulders and arms. Presently he raised his eyes and looked straight at the captain.

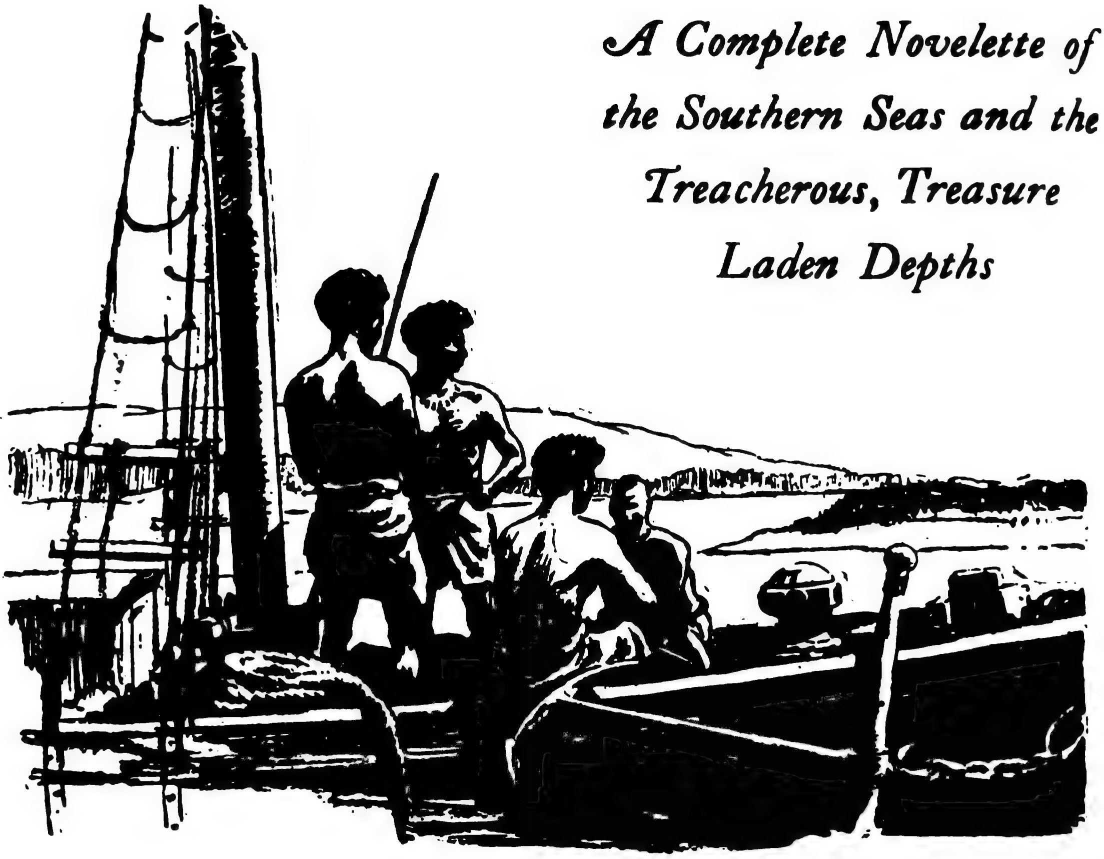
"I was readin' a book the other day, Duke. Kind of history. All about how they used to find out in the old days if an accused crook was innocent or guilty. Ordeal they called it. Now you take this sailor, Joe. If he didn't get caught in the propeller, he's driftin' around out there a hundred and fifty miles from shore. He ain't got a bat's chance of bein' picked up. You know that. But now here. If he should break all the odds and get picked up, wouldn't that make you think that whoever it is arranges those things reckoned he was innocent?"

"Perhaps it would, Bill."

"Then," went on the engineer with sudden energy, "don't report nothing about that life-belt. Give him his hundredth chance. You ain't positive how many of them life-belts there was, anyhow, are you, Duke?"

The captain pulled himself slowly to his feet, took a smudged typewritten list from his pocket and crumpled it into a little ball. Then he walked to the open port-hole above the chief engineer's settee and tossed it out.

"No, Bill, I'm not positive how many there were."



A Complete Novelette of the Southern Seas and the Treacherous, Treasure Laden Depths

PANAROA PASSAGE sparkled in the hot, white sunshine like a river of burnished sapphire. Sparks of diamond flame flickered and danced on the salt-white beaches beside the thick palm groves at the foot of the jade-green hills; the murmur of running water sounded in the green depths of the jungle; and the fragrance of flowers floated on the steaming air. Plumes of white mist trailed across the rugged hills and formed pools of ivory froth in the fern-clad gorges. Birds called and screeched as they circled and whirled above the trees. Down in front of the brown houses of a native village, a crowd of chubby jet-skinned children romped and screamed in the lime-green shallows, their shrill voices echoing across the water to where their parents, lazily paddling their canoes to the gardens on the opposite shore, idly watched a pearling lugger come to anchor in the center of the strait.

"It is the boat of the big man with hair like the setting sun," said a crinkly-skinned old man to his wife. He picked up his bamboo pipe and began to shred a bit of tobacco with his sharp nails. "Truly, it is his boat. Misi Weldoni is his name, and he is my proper friend," he went on. "When we have finished work in our garden, we will bring some yams and bananas to him and get a little of his strong tobacco. The tobacco of these sea folk is good tobacco for strong men like me." His paddle trailed in the water beside the canoe as he watched the men on the lugger.

The flat-chested old woman at the other end of the canoe glared at him.

"Words, idle words!" she exclaimed angrily. "Paddle, live-mouthed one, paddle. Am I, a weak woman, to do everything? Was there ever such a tired, useless, old babbler as thou? Move your arms, man of idleness, or we'll never get across the strait!" Her rheumy old eyes flashed with annoyance.

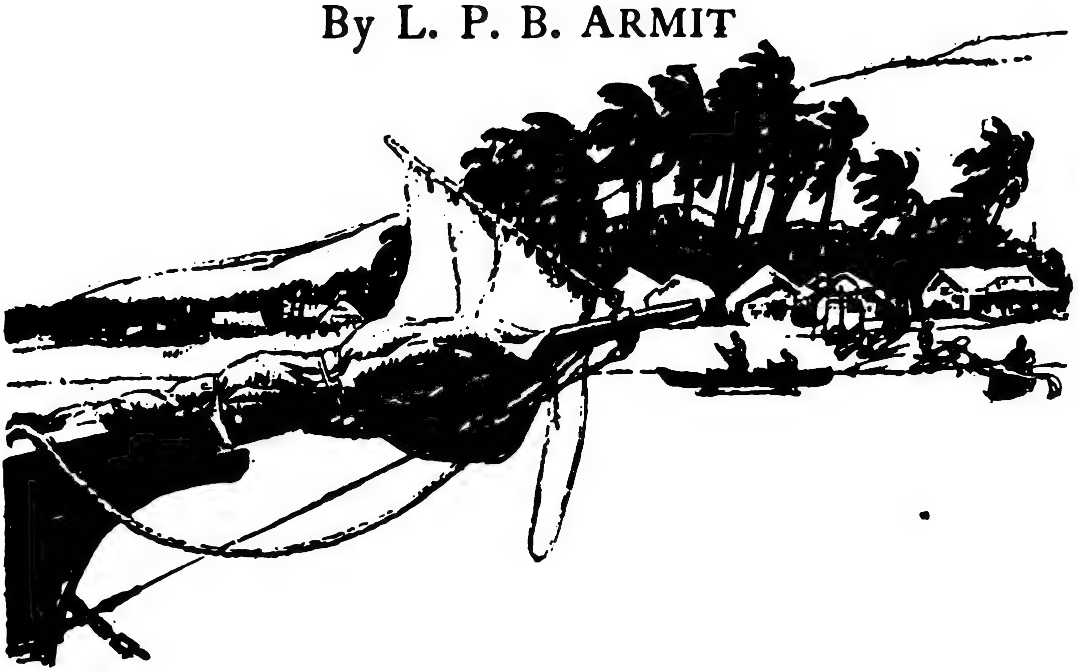
The old man opened his mouth to reply, glanced over his shoulder at his wife—and dug his paddle into the water.

"I'm paddling, little flower," he answered gently, and spat angrily over the side.

On the lugger, Jim Weldon, the master and owner, was helping his mate, Ted Rooney, a tan-faced Australian, into the diving dress. The crew of jet-black Torres Strait islanders sat about the deck waiting for the diver to go below.

BETWEEN *the* TIDES

By L. P. B. ARMIT



Rooney drew the heavy canvas suit up to his chest and wriggled his arms into the sleeves. Beads of sweat glistened on his face and trickled into his eyes.

"Cripes, Jim," he said, "hurry up and let me get down out of this heat; I'm getting boiled inside this outfit."

Weldon picked up the corselet and lowered it over his mate's head, settled it down between the double shoulder piece of thick red rubber and snapped the metal bands into place. A boy handed him the wing-nuts, which he spun into position on the studs that held the corselet in its place.

Rooney sat on the edge of the cabin scuttle and lifted his feet for the boots—huge lead-soled bluchers, each over twenty pounds in weight. He stamped his feet down and waited until the straps were buckled tight, then, with a boy on each side of him, he clumped to the ladder and climbed over into the water, standing on a rung for the helmet to be screwed on and the life line and air hose adjusted. A boy placed the heavy chest and back leads into place.

Weldon came to the side with a heavy diver's knife in his hands.

"Here, Ted," he called, "you'd better take the carver. It might be useful down there."

Rooney waved it away. "Don't want it," he answered. "It's more trouble'n it's worth."

Weldon persisted. "Remember what happened to Bert Downey when a shark took to him near Darnley Island, Ted? Downey'd be alive now only he was snake-headed and wouldn't take a knife down." He reached down to buckle it around his waist, but Rooney pushed him away.

"Don't want the damn thing, Jim, I tell you. I'll be all right without it; there's nothing here to worry me."

"That's what Downey said. And he met a shark that tore the side out of his dress and drowned him like a rat in a pail."

Rooney swore angrily. "All right, hook the beastly thing on then, if it'll please you!"

The knife was belted around his waist, the helmet went over his head and was locked tight to the corselet with a short turn, the safety latch snapped into position, and the diver was ready for the descent to the sea floor twenty-six fathoms below the shimmering surface.

The air-pump crew dropped into the hold beside the pump and spun the handles to see if the valves were working freely.

Weldon squatted on the deck before the diver, the face glass ready in his hands, while he spoke a few words to the boy in charge of the air hose.

Rooney crouched over the rail, the sunlight flashing on the glass ports in his helmet, a huge, grotesque figure, like some prehistoric marine monster. His voice rumbled from the open face-port as he watched the boy arranging the coils of the staunch, two-inch manila rope that was his life line.

"Keep your eyes open for branching corals, Ted," Weldon warned, "and watch out you don't get into a deep hole. Twenty-six fathoms is quite deep enough to play around in, especially when it's jammed in between high hills like this is," he added.

"Right! Shut the door, Jim, or I'll be a bit of boiled meat; it's like a steam kettle inside here." His deep laugh rumbled inside the helmet.

Weldon screwed in the face glass, glanced around to see the pump was turning and the air and pipe lines free, tapped the diver lightly on the top of the helmet, and stood up with the life line ready to lower him away.

Rooney stepped back off the short ladder, reached up a hand and adjusted the air-exhaust valve in his helmet, waved his hand to Jim, and sank through the glass-green water, his path jeweled by a stream of silver bubbles. A miniature whirlpool of breaking air bubbles boiled on the surface as the diver opened his air valve. Weldon slacked away the life line and watched the brown shape of the sinking man gradually fade into the silent, green depth, while behind him the boys sweated at the pump, which throbbed and gurgled as the beating pistons forced the air down to the man at the bottom of the strait.

A PUFF of wind creased the strait and ruffled Weldon's brick-red hair. He lifted his hat and edged in under the patch of shade from the tiny awning over the cabin.

"Cripes," he murmured to himself, "it's a sizzling day!"

The hands of the clock beside him caught his eye.

"Only five minutes since Ted got the helmet on. Lucky dog to be down there in the cool."

He watched the pitch bubbling in the deck seams. The pump crew bent over the handles, their black bodies streaming with sweat, swaying back and forth like ebony automatons.

The minutes passed.

Weldon felt drowsy. The fiery heat of the sun struck down through the thin awning; the deck was gradually growing misty to him when the sharp tinkle of the alarm on the clock brought him wide awake.

"Time to haul up Ted," he called to the boy in charge of the air hose.

He jerked the life line sharply to signal the diver that he was to come up. An answering jerk on the line came from the man on the sea bed.

Weldon commenced to haul in the life line. The movements of the diver, as he walked the bottom, came along the line to him. Suddenly, the regular tugs on the rope ceased. The line was shaken rapidly. Weldon sensed that something had happened down there in the green gloom. He yelled to the pumpers.

"More air—quickly!"

The lads threw their weight onto the handles, the indicator on the pressure gauge moved slowly up the scale.

Weldon repeated the "come up" signal.

The diver answered with the "more air" signal.

"Somet'in' wrong, boss!" said the pipe boy.

Weldon nodded.

The pump crew eased down the pump to listen.

Weldon roared to them to keep on pumping.

"Me t'ink diver been foul along coral," the pipe boy ventured, fear in his quavering voice.

"Another boy take the pipe," Weldon ordered.

The cook dropped his potato peeling and relieved the lad with the pipe. The pipe boy jumped across to Weldon and awaited his orders.

"I'll call him again," Weldon said to the listening boys, "and if he signals 'foul' we'll try and haul him free."

The life line jerked with his "come up" signal, then, while the clock marked off a minute that seemed like an hour, the white man and the blacks stared down into the water, watching the curving pipe and line. But no answering signal came from the diver.

Again the life line jerked the summons to Rooney to come up. A pause, and then, with a furious jerk, the line snapped down once with the diver's reply, "pull me up."

A yell of delight came from the boy with the pipe. "Him comin' up, boss! Him been clear now!"

Weldon hauled in the life line slowly, measuring off the fathoms with a practiced hand, stopping every five fathoms to allow the ascending man's blood stream to adjust itself to the changing pressure. To haul him straight up from the bottom would be unsafe, possibly fatal, for the compressed air in the diver's blood would, unless given a chance to expand gradually as the depth varied, bring on total paralysis as soon as the man's helmet was opened on his arrival at the surface. So, gradually, with extreme care to hold him sufficiently long in the varying depths, Weldon brought him to the surface and hauled him up to the ladder. The pipe boy drew in the pipe, his mate coiling it carefully so that it would not kink and shut off the air supply, while the pumpers eased down the beat of the pistons as the diver came towards the sunlight.

A brown shadow far below came into sight, the bulky body of the diver took shape in the green water, and was soon swaying, air whistling from the exhaust valve in the helmet, by the side of the ladder.

The pipe boy peered into the water. "Him been lose one boot, boss!" called the excited lad.

Weldon reached down a hand and helped his mate clamber up the ladder, his eyes noting in a glance that the diving dress was uninjured.

"Wasn't a shark, thank goodness," he told himself, and bent to unscrew the face glass.

Rooney's cheerful laugh echoed inside the helmet. "Stepped into a clam and got nipped by the left foot, Jim," he called.

Weldon removed the helmet and handed it to a boy.

"I'd just given you the 'come up' signal, and I turned to pick up the shell basket," Rooney went on, "when I felt my foot caught. Looked down and—" He spread his hands and grinned. "The damn thing had me anchored. Tried to kick the shell in with my other boot—no good." His face reddened. "Remembered the slasher. Yanked it out and cut the boot straps, and got clear!" He laughed grimly. "For a little while I thought it was all U. P. with little Teddy! Would've been, too, Jim, only—well, you forced the knife on me."

He stepped over the rail and stamped across the deck to the cabin top. "Guess we'll have to call it a day, Jim; I'm not going down with only one boot, even if I did drop onto a cluster of gold-lip shell just now."

Weldon smiled. "Guess I win, Ted, so far as taking a knife into the ditch is concerned."

They laughed.

"We'll pull up the pick and slide over to Sam Thornley's place," Weldon suggested. "Sam's sure to have a few spare boots lying about his store."

Rooney chuckled. "And we'll drop ashore and have morning tea with Sam's pretty daughter, eh Jim?" he chaffed.

Weldon's brown face glowed pink. "Sam's the only place nearer than Thursday Island where we can get a diver's boot," he answered sharply, and commenced to unscrew his mate's corselet.

II

A RAIN squall roared in from the sea and hammered the thatch on the broad-verandahed house under the flailing palms. Sam Thornley was stretched in a long chair, discussing the price of pearls with a visiting pearl buyer from France, while his daughter, June, poured tea and chatted cheerily with the half dozen pearlers who clustered around the tea table.

Louis Duprez, a tall, angular-faced, yellow-skined man, sat opposite June, his dark eyes flashing with barely suppressed rage as he watched Weldon come through the doorway and slip into a seat beside her.

June turned to the newcomer with a welcoming smile.

"Did you get the boot?" she inquired.

Weldon smiled at her. "Yes, thanks. Ted and I were going back today only the weather stopped us. No good taking the boys out in such a deluge; and, anyway, it's very much nicer here than it would be on the lugger."

Duprez leaned forward. "But the brave diver is not afraid of getting his feet wet, eh?" he asked, an insolent sneer in his voice.

Weldon glared at him. "Of course he doesn't mind the rain," June answered quickly. She turned to Weldon. "Don't take any notice of Louis, Jim; he's annoyed because he couldn't get back to that big shell patch he found last week." She smiled at the angry pearler. "Aren't you, Louis?"

The men around the table glanced at one another. They were all competitors in the pearling field and the reference to their rival's find of a new pearl-shell bed interested them. A volley of questions was fired at the angry pearler.

"Found a new patch!" . . . "Whereabouts?" . . . "Shrewd bird! You never said a word about it." . . . "Get any good pearls, Louis?"

Duprez stared at them, his lean face reddened with rage.

"Think I'm going to tell you? No chance in life, not one little hope! Why should I? Me, I am very lucky in diving because I go out and look for shell, while you fellows waste your time picking up the remnants I leave on the old ground. He laughed harshly. "What I find is my own, savvy?"

A ripple of amusement followed his outburst.

Thornley looked across at the laughing group. "Now then," he boomed, "if you birds can't keep from arguing, I'll get up and chase you out!" His hearty laugh echoed across the veranda.

The pearlers grinned at him.

"Blame old Louis, Sam; we're all behaving like little gentlemen, aren't we, Miss Thornley?" chuckled a big, yellow-haired man.

June nodded her approval. "Couldn't be nicer, dad," she put in. She turned to Duprez. "Did I do wrong in mentioning the discovery you made, Louis? I'm so sorry." A beaming smile accompanied her words.

Duprez forgot his ill temper. "You couldn't do wrong if you tried, Miss Thornley," he answered gallantly.

The group around the table commenced to break up.

Duprez nodded to Thornley, bowed to June, and, without a word to the men around him, stalked down the steps and strode off through the rain to the beach.

Weldon found himself left by the exodus. He got up to leave. His hat and raincoat were hanging on a rack at the other end of the veranda. June was returning from seeing the visitors depart and she followed him to the rack.

"I'm sorry Louis was so nasty just now," she said. "He was——"

Weldon was putting on his oilskin as she spoke.

"Not worth worrying about, little lady," he interrupted, and smiled at her. "Louis always has a grouch about something, so nobody minds what he says." He looked over his shoulder at her father and the pearl buyer. "I was going to ask you something, June," he went on, "but—but—" He stopped abruptly; the hands that were buttoning his coat trembled.

June looked at him. "What was it, Jim?" she asked. She came a step closer. "Have you found another big pearl?" she inquired.

Weldon looked down at her auburn curls. "The best in the world, June, but—but I'm a bit doubtful what to do about it," he said softly.

She smiled. "Don't be too hurried about it, Jim, because—you know what I mean to say—it won't depreciate in value or lose its luster by waiting a while, will it?" A faint pink showed in her cheeks. "Will you come up again before you leave for the strait?"

Weldon shook his head. "No chance. This blow will peter out before morning, so we'll be on our way at daylight."

"Dad's taking me along with him next week to look at Panamori, so we might blow along to see you as we pass by. Louis and Dad have an idea of planting coconuts on Panamori."

"Panamori? That's only a couple of miles from where we're working," Weldon put in. "I'll be watching out for you and I'll——"

"Discuss the big pearl with me, won't you?" June completed.

He laughed. "Of course. And you'll tell me what to do about it, eh?"

The pink in her cheeks increased. "I suppose so," she answered, and walked to the veranda edge.

Weldon turned to her father. "So long, Sam," he called. "See you visit the *Nixie* next week."

Thornley waved a hand to him. "We'll be there, Jim. So long and the best of luck!"

Weldon stepped off the veranda onto the stairs.

"I'll be looking out for you, June," he whispered, as he passed her, "and—and we'll talk about that pearl."

She watched him splash through the pools of water on the narrow, hibiscus-lined path and disappear among the swaying palms.

III

THE ebb tide raced through the narrow passage like a river in flood, swirling past the anchored lugger with dancing, foam-tipped waves that flashed in the hot, white sunshine. The air was full of the music of the rushing waters; the anchor chain grated and rumbled in the bitts forward as the vessel strained and tugged at her cable. Work was over until the tide slacked, for a diver, be he ever so heavily weighted, could not reach the bottom in that irresistible current.

Weldon and Rooney sat under the awning aft, a heap of gold-lip pearl-shell between them, which they were methodically opening and searching for pearls. The salty reek of the opened shells filled their nostrils as they squeezed the big green oysters that their prying knives brought into sight.

Rooney grinned at his mate. "Got another tiny pearl, Jim," he remarked, and showed a gleaming white gem in his huge palm.

"We'll make a lot of money out of this lot—I don't think," Weldon answered. "Four days' work since we got back from Sam's, and not a thing to show for it, but a handful of baroque and about a hundredweight of shell. Luck's dead crook, Ted."

Rooney pried open another shell and began to run the big green oyster through his fingers.

"Guess we'll have to give this place a miss and go look for a better spot," he agreed.

"With the market the way it is just now, we're just about paying expenses," Weldon went on. "Wish we could find out where Duprez is working; the lucky devil seems to always drop on anything that's worth finding."

Rooney grunted and showed him another tiny gem.

"Yes, if Louis'd opened this shell he'd have been pretty certain to have raked out a decent stone. Wonderful, the luck he has." He shot a sharp look at his mate. "He's been paying a lot of visits to Sam's lately and—" He dragged another shell from the pile, and left the remark unfinished.

Weldon ripped a shell open and looked at him.

"Yes," he said, and waited for him to speak.

Rooney laid down his knife.

"Yes," he continued, "that greasy, yellow Louis has been hovering about Sam's quite a lot. It seems old Sam's in debt to Louis for a fair wad, and Sam's not quite able to spar up the coin just yet. I don't know," his voice was full of meaning, "but the yellow swine may be getting ideas about little June." He leaned towards his friend. "I'm not suggesting anything, Jim, but a girl's often been induced by dirty coin to change her name." He spat over the side.

Weldon's hands shook. "You don't mean—?" he asked slowly.

Rooney yawned. "Can't say for certain, Jim, but I heard a few remarks from the fellows who were over at Sam's, and putting two and two together, it looks as if Louis's starting to squeeze Sam for the coin he lent him last year to help pay for the launch. I worded Louis about it, gave him a bit of chaff about him having an eye for a pretty girl, and he sort of stuck out his chest and suggested he was a starter for the matrimonial handicap." He tapped his knife on the shell before him. "Dirty swine like him give me a yearn to kill something."

Weldon shook his head. "But she wouldn't dream of tying up with a low skunk like him; she's right out of his class," he declared. But his face showed he was not quite sure.

Rooney's next remark increased his doubt.

"Don't be too certain, Jim. I'm a good few years older than you and I know of several cases where girls have tied up with wasters because their old men owed these skunks a bit of coin."

Weldon's eyes blazed angrily. "But it's too awful to think of a girl like June being grabbed by such a beast," he snapped.

Rooney laughed grimly. "Too true," he growled. "It'd make any decent bloke narked to think of a nice girl being tied to a dirty brute like him. But it's being done every day by the very best people—for money." He lit his pipe. "Coin is a great persuader and it talks all languages, Jim." His bantering tone changed. "I'm not pushing into your private business, lad, but if you've got sense, and I know you have, you take a sporting chance, next time you see her, and ask her straight out how you stand. You never know your luck."

Weldon's face was troubled. He looked across the sparkling, foam-flecked strait, his mind busy with the problem that every man must solve sooner or later.

"Wish I knew where I could raise a fair wad quickly," he exclaimed. "If I was able to help old Sam out of that yellow devil's clutches it might mean—" He left the remark unfinished.

"Everything!" Rooney completed, and dropped the handful of green shell-oyster he had been squeezing for pearls, into the basin between them.

"Everything to that poor girl," Weldon corrected.

Rooney stretched his long arms and yawned. "I was going to tell you before, Jim," he said, "that I got onto the location of that shell find of Louis's, while we were at Sam's last week, but I held off telling you until we'd proved this passage was a duffer."

"Go ahead," Weldon answered, his face brightening.

"I got a couple of his pump boys talking," Rooney went on, "and they told me he was lifting whips of big shell from that deep passage between Panamori and Arusoli." He chuckled. "So that's why Sam's going there so often with his launch," he finished.

"We'll go and have a look at it, Ted," Weldon declared.

"It'll be really funny to hear Louis's remarks when he spots us blowing in," exulted his mate.

"It's a free ocean, and we've got as much right there as he has," Weldon told him, and called to the crew to get the sails up.

IV

THE *Nixie* entered the passage between the glittering green peaks of Panamori and Arusoli and rounded into the wind a couple of hundred yards away from where Duprez's lugger swung to her anchor. Louis watched her with an angry light in his eyes.

"The thievin' swine!" he snarled to his tender, a shifty-eyed half-caste. "Come to steal our shell."

"Bad luck, them comin' here, boss," said the tender, "but we can't stop them. We've had a good long time here since we found the patch and——"

"Oh, dry up, can't you, and mind your own business," Louis roared. "Stop 'em? What hope have I of stopping two white men like them, when I've only got a spineless fool like you to back me?" He cursed the cringing tender with searing abuse that woke a murderous flash in the man's eyes.

A hail came from the *Nixie.*

"How's things, Louis?" Rooney called.

"Real good until you sneakin' cows come here," Louis shouted at him. "Why the hell can't you leave me to work my own finds? Divers! A poor pair of apologies for divers you two are."

A shout of laughter answered his insults.

"Don't get your hair off, Louis," Rooney called, "there's plenty of room here for us all. We didn't tell the other boats where we were heading for, so we oughtn't to have any of them rambling down this way."

Duprez glared at him. "I found this place, Ted, and I ought to be left to work it on my own," he answered sourly, a nasty look in his eyes.

"Cheer up, Louis," Weldon shouted, "we won't rake it all up, so you're sure to get your whack."

Duprez turned his back on him and swore at a boy who was in his way. The tender came and stood beside him, a crafty look on his mean face.

"Suppose we try somethin', boss?" he suggested.

"What the hell can we do, Martin?"

The tender dropped his voice. "I tell you, boss." He spoke for a while, glancing about the deck with his shifty eyes.

Louis smiled as he listened.

"Not a bad lurk, if it comes off," he whispered back. "We'll give it a try-out in the morning." He patted the half-caste on the back. "You're on a gold watch if it works, Martin; but you'll get hurt if you blab about it afterwards." The menace in his voice was not lost upon the tender.

"I forget everything right away," Martin assured him eagerly. "Always I've kept quiet about things you did——"

Louis glared at him, and the tender left the sentence unfinished. "I savvy, boss," he mumbled, and went forward.

Aboard the *Nixie* Weldon and Rooney studied a chart.

"Here, where we are, is the shallowest part of the passage," Weldon said, running a finger in front of the curving shore of Panamori. "The deep water seems to be on the Arusoli side."

"And it's real deep, too," Rooney agreed, "nothing under twenty-six fathoms, except on the narrow ledge on the rim of the island. These passages between mountainous islands always seem to be deep—and full of shell." His finger stopped over a spot marked thirty-two. "Gee!" he exclaimed. "Here's a deep hole, Jim; we'll have to look out, here."

"We've got a lead line, so we'll check the depths before we go down," Weldon answered.

V

THE first faint tints of the sunrise stained the sky rose and violet and heliotrope as the luggers lifted their anchors and moved out across the strait. Duprez was first away and he headed across the passage for the Arusoli shore. The dying breeze from the north barely rippled the water, but it was sufficient to take the lugger across the strait.

The *Nixie* followed him a few minutes later.

Rooney came up from the cabin in his suit of thick woolens, and leisurely got into the diving dress. "Look's as if Louis is going to work on the edge of that deep hole," he told his mate.

They watched the lugger drop her anchor and clew up her sails.

"Deep water patches are always big ones," Rooney remarked, "so that's why our friend over there has been getting so much big shell." He grinned. "Well, son, this is where we drop our pick and help him to clean it up."

The lugger came closer until the *Nixie* was a bare hundred yards away, when Weldon let his anchor go.

Duprez was already dressed. He sat on the cabin top and watched the *Nixie* approach and let her anchor drop.

"He'll find it a bit deep," he whispered to Martin, and laughed harshly.

The half-caste sniggered. "I don't know, boss," he said, a nasty smirk on his yellow face.

Rooney called to Duprez. "Hello, Louis! Starting early, ain't you?"

Louis waved a hand to him. "Got to, when a lot of crooks like you come stealin' my shell," he shouted, and laughed loudly. "No matter, Ted," he added in a more amicable tone, "I don't care what you get; there's plenty for all of us."

Weldon winked at his mate. "He's altered his tune since last night, Ted," he said. "Wonder what's made him so amiable? I always thought he was one of those birds who wake up with an outsize in livers."

Duprez called again. "Can't sit here and waste the slack water," he shouted, "so I'll get down right away." He stamped across the narrow deck and stepped over the rail on to the short ladder that hung there. The half-caste adjusted his leads, and locked the helmet into place.

Rooney turned to his mate. "Guess I'll get down, too," he said, and stepped over the rail on to the ladder.

A boy swung his leads into place and fastened their side clews. Weldon came forward with the helmet and was about to put it over his mate's head, but Rooney pushed it away.

"Wait a moment, Jim," he said. "Drop the lead and see what I'm going into."

"Louis just gone down, Ted, and——"

"Drop the lead," Rooney repeated. "I know that yellow cow's gone down; but I want to know what depth we're floating in *here*," he said angrily.

Weldon took the coiled line and did as he was asked. Rooney watched the marks slip under the water, counting softly as they passed. Suddenly he swore aloud and started to climb back over the rail to the deck.

Weldon faced him. "Thirty-six fathoms!" he gasped.

Rooney nodded slowly. "Thirty-six fathoms. And that murdering fox over there's hanging on his life line, four or five fathoms under the surface, waiting for me to go down to my death." He turned towards the cabin, his face red with rage. "It'd serve that skunk right if I took a gun to him. But it'd take a lot of explaining to a jury—a stunt like this." He sat on the cabin.

"But I'd have stopped you when I noticed how much line was out, Ted; you couldn't 've got into that depth with me on the line," Weldon told him.

Rooney laughed grimly. "No doubt, Jim, no doubt; but it's a thousand to one I'd have been on the bottom before you saw what line was left on deck. Remember, lad, you—and I, too—rarely look at the line that's left on deck, because we're too busy looking after the man down below." He smiled. "A shrewd trick, only I happen to've heard of it before. Don't know what struck me just now, but it flashed over my mind that it'd be a good wheeze to drop the lead." He laughed. "And it was!"

Weldon told the boys to hoist the jib; the pump boys, not waiting for the order, were already heaving in the anchor. The rattle of the windlass brought Duprez's tender to the side of his craft. The half-caste watched the *Nixie* for a moment, satisfied himself that his murderous scheme had failed, and went back to his stand with Duprez's life line.

Rooney and Weldon watched the half-caste slowly haul in his charge.

"He's had the bight of the line trailing," Rooney told his mate. "Now he's trying to act as if he was hauling his man up from the bottom; but I can see from the easy way the pumpers are moving the pump handles that Mister Louis's not down very far. Ah! Here he comes," he exclaimed, as the water foamed alongside the other lugger. Duprez's helmet appeared above the surface, and in another minute he was standing on the ladder, while the half-caste reached down and removed his face glass.

"Martin's breaking the bad news to him that I wasn't caught in their trap," Rooney went on. "Watch him take his helmet off and help him on deck."

They watched the helmet lifted off and saw Duprez clamber over the rail and stand to look at them.

"Don't let on to them that we suspect anything," Weldon cautioned. "You keep quiet while I tell them we're going to work the other side of the passage," he added.

"You're not stoppin' long," Duprez called. "Is it too deep for you here?" he sneered.

"Not a bit," Weldon lied, "but there's too much branching coral down below, so we're moving over to try the other side."

Duprez laughed. "It's a big passage, so we won't get in each other's way," he snarled. He turned to his tender. "You fool! Now those two swine'll have it in for us, blast you."

The half-caste quailed. "Just bad luck, boss," he whispered. "Might be next time—" he commenced.

"Next time, hell!" Duprez hissed. "Think those two'll give us another chance? Get the anchor up, damn you for a meddlin', boneheaded fool."

The boys rushed to the windlass and started to spin the handles. They knew the temper of their master when he was in one of his tantrums. The chain rattled in while they asked each other what had caused the quarrel aft.

Duprez's angry voice sounded again.

"Up jib!" he roared.

Martin hurried to obey. One of the crew was before him. The half-caste's fists shot out and the boy staggered back with his nose oozing blood.

"That's the style, Martin," hissed his master. "Knock his bloody block off!"

A murmur of rage came from the lad's mates, but the voices stopped abruptly as Duprez roared another volley of abuse at the frightened boys. "By cripes!" he yelled. "One more squeak from you, and I'll come for'ard and kick the guts out of you!"

Martin ran aft and put the lugger on the wind.

Duprez lit a cigarette and stared across the dancing water. The sight of the *Nixie* in the strait that he had kept so long to himself made him fume with helpless fury. He had found the shell here. If that stupid, baby-faced girl had only kept her tongue quiet, Weldon would never have thought of coming here. What an idiot he was to tell her where he was getting so much shell. Sam knew about Panamori, but he had him fixed so he would never dare to tell about it. It was June's fault. Of course she liked that big fool Weldon. Well, he, Louis Duprez, was no fool; he'd make her behave herself when she became his wife. And that wouldn't be long now, for Sam had told him he was unable to meet the loan. Well, there was one easy way for Sam to settle the debt. Of course June would probably try to sidestep marrying him, but she'd change her mind when she discovered what would happen to Sam if she balked at becoming Mrs. Duprez. "Mrs. Duprez." That sounded fine. He gloated over the prospect. He'd put it to Sam when he came along; he ought to be here very soon now. "Sam," he'd say, "if I become your son-in-law—" that was a real nice way to say it—"we'll call that little loan of yours settled. You fix it with June, and when the wedding is over, I'll write you a receipt for the money you owe me—a receipt for the full amount of the debt, you understand." That was the way to square her old man.

No doubt about it, money was a great help when you wanted anything. There was a chance Sam might try and wriggle out of letting him marry June; but he'd soon alter the old fool's mind when he told him it was either him as a son-in-law, or the loss of everything the old idiot possessed. Sam was no babbling lunatic; he knew on which side his bread was buttered. The idea'd work all right. And wouldn't that fool Weldon go sour when he heard he, Louis Duprez, had beaten him for his girl. He chuckled at the thought. How he'd rub the dirt into that big cow Weldon. He'd let him see who was the best man.

Martin's soft voice interrupted his pleasant reverie.

"Say, boss," he said, "don't you worry about them fellows on the *Nixie*. Plenty time for us to get square with them for sneakin' our shell."

Duprez's yellow face was creased with a faint smile. "Worry, hell!" he growled. "When I finish with them, Martin, they'll be doing the worrying." His black eyes bored into the cringing tender's. "Mister Weldon and company will sweat blood before I'm done with them."

The tender averted his eyes; he shivered at the thought of what he had seen in his master's snaky orbs.

Down the strait the water broke into a circle of falling spray where a shining flat object flopped back upon the surface.

Rooney saw the sparkling foam. "Looks like a diamond fish, Jim," he said to Weldon. "I don't like those devils prowling around when there's diving to be done."

Weldon laughed. "Same here, Ted," he replied, "but it's hardly likely to worry us. I've never seen them around while the tide's high; and it's probably making out for the open sea, so I'm not worrying over it."

"Only one thing to scare a diamond fish —dynamite," Rooney answered. "If it was a bit closer I'd take the dinghy and lob a couple of shots at it. I never feel comfortable while a big brute like that is cruising about where I'm diving."

VI

THE strait glistened like a lane of burnished turquoise under the blazing noontide sun. Not a breath of wind stirred the hot, steaming air; the heavens were unflecked by a single cloud; far up in the flaming blue a flock of frigate birds drifted slowly on motionless wings. Heat waves quivered and danced above the salt-white beaches; the jade-green slopes of the hills flashed and sparkled in the diamond-bright light. Plumes of white smoke drifted up above the coconut palms; the rhythmic beat of the canoe makers' adzes in the village, in a narrow halfmoon bay, came over the silent water.

Rooney listened to the water splashing along the lugger's side, while he sat on a box in the narrow shadow of a tiny awning and watched the trailing life line in the water before him. He was drowsy with the heat, but he kept himself awake by scanning the surface of the strait, talking to the boy in charge of the air pipe, and humming songs.

A mile away, down the passage, Duprez's lugger showed against a coconut-clad point.

The tide was beginning to rise. Here and there about the strait, silvery bands marked the incoming currents that, in an hour or so, would be swirling through the passage with the speed of a mill-race. The band of exposed coral on either shore was beginning to sink beneath the surface; rings of ivory foam, fringing the pinnacles of coral which rose from a lime-green pool inshore, told the watching white man that the tide was running and the day's work would soon come to its close. He glanced at the clock beside him, saw that it was time to haul Weldon up, and going to the side gave a sharp jerk on the life line. An answering tug came from the man on the sea floor.

"Just about time for another dip," Rooney told the pipe boy. "See the foam on those coral pinnacles, Cockroach; tide's coming in fast, so we'll have to shake it up if we want to get in another dip today." He gathered in the slack of the line and commenced to haul Weldon to the sunlight.

A boy sitting on the windlass forward suddenly jumped to his feet and peered down the strait towards Duprez's boat.

Rooney and the pipe boy slowly pulled in the line and the air pipe, but a cry from the boy forward caused them to stop abruptly. "What for you sing out, Saucepan?" chorused the lads on the pump, and craned their necks to see over the hatch combing. The pipe boy shaded his eyes and stared down the passage.

Rooney's sharp voice broke the silence. "Here!" he called. "Pump up. Let's get the diver aboard before you start anything else."

The lads returned to their work, while the boy forward started to babble excitedly something about having seen a "fish as big as a small island." His mates laughed and jeered him, telling him that he ought to wash his eyes before he looked again.

Weldon's helmet broke the surface a few minutes later. He was hauled to the ladder, and his face glass was barely off before the pumpers were out of the hold and swarming up the rigging for a look at the big fish.

"What's biting the coons?" Weldon asked as he came over the rail.

"Saucepan reckons he saw a big diamond fish playing about down the passage," Rooney told him. He passed his mate a smoke and gazed down the strait. "Better call it a day, Jim," he suggested. "There's barely time for another dip and the tide'll be running strong soon."

Weldon grinned. "Guess I will knock off now, Ted; that big fish is a bit too close to be pleasant." He waved a hand to the pile of unopened pearl shell that filled the space aft of the cabin. "Pretty decent haul for a day, laddie. It'll take an hour or longer to open that heap—and all big shell, too." He blew a smoke ring. "Wonder how Louis did today? He's been anchored in the one spot all day, so I guess he's doing as well as we are."

"And that ain't too putrid," agreed Rooney.

One of the boys dropped off the backstay and pointed up the passage. "One launch comin' roun' point, boss," he said.

Rooney reached into the canvas pocket on the side of the cabin and got his binoculars.

"It's Sam's craft," he declared after he had studied the approaching vessel for a moment. "I'd know that cocked-up stern among a thousand." He looked again, then passed the glasses to his mate. "Take a squint, Jim, and do your eyes good; I saw a white dress." He winked at his partner and slapped him on the shoulder.

Weldon snatched the glasses from him and swung them onto the white smear that showed against the sea line. "Yes," he said, trying to keep his voice steady, "it's Sam's boat." He strained his eyes for a glimpse of June. Yes, there she was. His hands shook so much that he could barely keep the lenses on the little craft.

Rooney's voice sounded behind him.

"Better get your gear off, lad, and make yourself pretty before the visitors arrive," he chaffed. "A diving suit ain't quite the right dress to meet a lady in."

Weldon laughed, his face pink under his tan.

Half an hour slipped past. Weldon sat on the cabin in a soft silk shirt and immaculate whites; Rooney, similarly attired, was setting out a bottle, glasses, and tea things for the visitors.

The launch was close now; the barking sound of her exhaust came over the still water.

Rooney mopped his sweat-beaded face and trained the binoculars on the approaching vessel. "Huh," he grunted. "We'll want another cup. June's brought a chaperone with her, a hefty-looking lady, too." He dug his mate in the ribs. "Better be careful, son, she looks a determined female; and a good-looking cove like you can't run any risks." He grinned at his friend and dropped into the cabin for another cup.

Weldon walked to the side to receive the visitors.

The launch was only a hundred yards away now. "Time he started to round her up if he's coming aboard," he thought. But the little craft held to her course. "Funny he doesn't haul her up," he muttered. "Sam's always called for a yarn and a drink when he's been down before."

A voice hailed him from the speeding launch. "Can't stop, Jim," Thornley roared. "We're in the devil's own hurry, so you'll excuse us running past you."

Weldon's heart sank. "What's wrong, Sam?" he called. "Ten minutes'll be plenty time for a drop of tea. Come aboard. There's stacks of time for you to get to Panamori."

"Can't do, laddie," boomed the trader. "I'll see you tomorrow as I come back. So long." He bobbed back under the awning.

A handkerchief fluttered for a moment, then the racing craft was past and heading for the Panamori shore.

Rooney came out of the cabin. "Well, if that ain't cool hide, I'm a Dutchman!" he growled. "The dirty dog to give the poor little *Nixie* the go-by. I'll tune him up, the unsociable old devil." He spat over the side. "And after me polishing all those glasses and things." He gazed after the fleeing boat. "Stone and bloody crows! And I kidded myself I was a fair-haired boy with old Sam."

Weldon shrugged his shoulders. "Wonder who the strange woman is?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Search me," Rooney laughed. "Probably a lady missionary that Sam's giving a passage to one of the mission stations. I had a good look at her; she's nobody we know." He glanced at the heap of shell. "Guess I'll shed these immaculate clothes and start opening shell. Come on, son, let's get busy and see if fortune's going to favor us with a pearl or two."

VII

TEN minutes later, back inside their soiled khaki, the two men sat on the deck. Rooney had his favorite, and oldest, pipe going full blast. It smelt vilely. A puff of nicotine-tainted smoke blew into Weldon's face. He drew back and glared at his mate.

"Spare me gloomy days, Ted," he growled peevishly. "Why can't you sling that stinking pipe into the ditch? It smells worse than a glue works!"

Rooney opened his mouth to make a humorous retort, saw the ill humor in his friend's eyes, and subsided. "Poor devil!" he thought. "June giving him the go-by like that has made him snake-headed. Blast these women!" He tossed the pipe on the cabin top and rolled a cigaret.

Weldon never lifted his eyes from the shell before him. He was in a black mood; the green-eyed monster, jealousy, had him in its slimy coils. June had passed him without a word. A fleeting glance and a wave of her handkerchief was good enough for James Weldon. He ground his teeth as he thought of her over there at Panamori with that smirking yellow beast Duprez. He visualized the scene there. Louis, tricked out in his best white duck, would run forward to help her over the side. Then, after he had given her tea, while that selfish hog Sam, mopped up a couple of whiskies, Louis would put her in his dinghy and escort her ashore to the bamboo house under the coconuts. Of course Sam would ask him to stop for dinner; and so the slimy brute would spend the evening with her, telling her what a wonderful fellow he was.

He shivered with helpless rage. And while that skunk Louis was dancing round her, he, poor Jim Weldon, was sitting under a patch of shadow and looking at the rising tide. No confidential talks on a moonlit veranda for James Weldon when Louis Duprez, the man to whom Sam owed money, was hanging around . . . He jabbed his knife into a shell, wrenched it around—and the blade snapped off at the hilt. "Devil take the thing!" he snarled. "Everything goes wrong in this blasted place!" He flung the knife handle into the sea and yelled to Saucepan to bring him another knife. "And damn quick," he ended the order to the startled boy.

Rooney went on opening shell, a flash of amusement in his hazel eyes. "Jupiter!" he whispered to himself. "It's a fair cow to be in love." He glanced at the shell in Weldon's hand. "That's a whopping big shell you've got there, Jim," he remarked.

Weldon took the knife from Saucepan and drove it down through the contractor muscle, wrenched once, and the shell gaped open disclosing the big green oyster. A bulge on the inside of the shell caught his eye as he cut away the flesh from the shell. He emptied the oyster into his left hand and pushed the shell across to Rooney.

"A decent blister, Ted. Have a look at it; there might be a pearl inside that bulge."

Rooney nodded. "I'll cut it out later," he said, and laid the shell beside him.

Weldon was squeezing the slimy flesh between his fingers. Suddenly a round object met his exploring digits. He tore away the soft membrane that covered it and a pure white sphere of glistening nacre met his gaze.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "A pearl. A real snifter!" His fingers trembled with excitement as he snatched it from its slimy bed. He held it in his cupped hand and gloated over it.

Rooney leaned forward, a smile of ineffable joy creasing his sunburnt cheeks. "The real thing, son," he gasped, "the catch of the bloody season!"

A ray of sunshine flickered across the gem.

"Look at the luster it's got. It's a ball of congealed moonlight," Weldon shouted delightedly.

"Cripes, Jim, she's worth a thousand pounds at least."

"Probably more, if we place it right," Weldon told him.

A thousand pounds. Half of that sum was his. Five hundred shining yellow discs of gold. Weldon's heart sang as the fact registered itself upon his brain. What couldn't he do with a sum like that? He pondered the problem. "What about helping Sam to get out of Duprez's clutches?" said his inner self. "I'll do it," he declared loudly.

"Do what?" inquired Rooney.

"Buy—I mean," he hurriedly corrected himself, "sell this beauty for all I can get, Ted."

"Which is a real sensible remark," said Rooney dryly. He dragged a shell from the heap and winked at his mate. "Now that you're getting over the awful shock, son, you'd better try and stagger into the cabin and lock yon ball of wealth away with our other pelf. If the crew get their lamps on it, well, it might walk off."

Weldon turned to enter the cabin. His foot was on the top step of the ladder, when a shout from a boy forward halted him.

"Flag half-mast on boat belong Louis," the boy called, pointing down the strait.

Rooney grabbed the binoculars from the cabin top and focused them on the lugger. "Something wrong, Jim," he said. "There's a red flag half-way up the foremast." He looked again. "Yes, it's half-mast. And the launch is coming this way full lick." He handed the glasses to Weldon. "Wonder what's happened? Damned nasty if he's fouled, and the tide starting to run in on him."

A puff of wind stirred the surface of the glassy water.

Weldon watched the black shapes on the distant lugger; he could see the half-caste standing by the rail and waving frantically to the launch as it headed towards the *Nixie*.

"Louis's pump still going, Ted, so it looks as if he's fouled his line or pipe. Guess it's up to us to go and help him."

"Sure thing," said Rooney. He glanced at the shore reef. "Tide's coming in fast, he went on. "We'll have to hurry."

"We'll never get the *Nixie* over there against this current," Weldon answered. "The only thing to do is to stick the pump and gear aboard the launch."

"Let's get busy then," agreed his mate. He dropped into the hold and began to free the lashings on the pump. Weldon had his shirt off and was pulling on his diving flannels. The crew were already getting the gear together.

Rooney looked up from his task. "It's my turn to dive, Jim," he snapped. "You can tender me and——"

"I'm going down. So that's that," said Weldon firmly.

"But—" commenced his mate; then, as he saw the flash in the other man's eyes, he left the remark unfinished. "All right, have it your own way," he amended hastily, "but don't take any fool risk." He freed another lashing and chuckled dryly. "Don't forget to take the knife with you," he called.

Weldon laughed. "Bet your life!"

VIII

"SEVENTEEN fathoms, boss," said Martin, his lips trembling. "Anchor was foul and he went down to clear it. He give me 'come up' signal. I start to haul him up—and he won't come. Two, three, four times I been try to pull him clear, but he still stop there. Then two crew he help me pull, but no good, so I hoist red calico to call you over to help. He's been down forty minutes now, boss." He looked helplessly at Rooney.

Thornley was helping Rooney to fasten the leads on Weldon. The launch had just arrived alongside the lugger. The gurgle of Duprez's air pump sounded in the rescuers' ears like the gasps of a dying man.

Weldon stood on the ladder waiting for his helmet to be screwed on. "Sounds as if his pipe was fouled, Ted," he said slowly. "Now listen," he continued, "and don't forget what I want you to do. I'm going down along Louis's life line. If the line's caught among the coral, I'll cut it free, give you a shake and two pulls on my line to let you know, and then you just wait until I signal 'come up,'' when you can yank both me and Louis to the top. Savvy?"

Rooney nodded.

"Then let's get down," Weldon went on. "The current increases every minute."

"But what'll you do if his pipe's tangled up among the coral?" Thornley asked.

"Cut it free, Sam; that's why I'm going down along his life line. If the line's free, I'll know right away that he's held by the pipe, so all I've got to do is chop it free from his helmet." He smiled grimly.

Thornley regarded him with eyes suspiciously moist. "For God's sake be careful, son," he said, and wrung his hand.

Weldon smiled, and looked up at Rooney. "Go ahead, Ted. We're wasting time," he said.

The pump on the launch commenced to turn; the air whistled into the helmet as Rooney lowered it over Weldon's head.

A minute later a brown shape far down in the green depth faded out of sight; Weldon was on his way to succor the man he hated. That he was risking his life to aid the man who had tried to lure his mate to a horrible death only a few hours before, did not enter his thoughts. All that he considered was the fact that a brother diver was in peril; personal feeling had no place in the argument when life was in jeopardy. Here in the soundless, green world of the underseas the petty things of life were forgotten for a little while, blotted out by the Grim Specter that lurked ever ready to strike down the puny intruders from the sunlit world above. He slipped slowly along the guide line, peering through his face glass at the moving hordes of fish that darted around him. A dark mass appeared in front. He gripped the line and gazed down upon a mass of rainbow coral, a veritable garden of iridescent colors, through the nooks and crannies of which schools of ruby and emerald fish were flashing in and out.

The line led down and through the glittering maze.

"Fouled in a dozen places," Weldon said to himself. "No wonder Martin couldn't yank him clear." The helmet echoed with the sound of his voice. "I'll find Louis before I do anything," he added, and released his grasp on the line.

The bottom came into sight. He saw the lugger's chain stretched across the tangled weeds and swaying grasses.

His feet crunched into the brittle growths. He tramped through the short corals and glowing anemones, following the chain. The anchor appeared, one fluke sunk to the shank in a horrible-looking liver-like substance that grew on the seabed. Back and forth he walked, counting his steps carefully as he went, so as not to lose his position near the anchor, but there was no sign of the tangled diver, nor could he pick up the bight of his lifeline. "Where the hell's he got to?" he asked himself at last, as he made his tenth turn from the chain.

A huge gray shape came towards him. He stepped back and felt for the knife. The shark swam slowly by and disappeared into the gloom. Something glowed in a coral grotto a few yards ahead. Weldon peered at it for a moment, then stepped forward and stamped his boot on it. Something wriggled under his foot; a cloud of brownish vapour rose around him; the octopus had squirted a screen of sepia fluid to cover its get-away.

The air pressure inside the dress was making his sleeves uncomfortably tight, so he reached a hand up to open the exhaust valve in his helmet. As his hand went up he moved his head back to bring the valve close. He was now looking up towards the surface. Something swayed far up above him, a brownish shape from which depended a white streak.

He looked around and found he was standing at the base of a coral cliff, the side of which was encrusted with tall, branching corals. The white streak was the missing life line, the brown shape the diver. The thought stayed his hand.

"He must have got his pipe caught up there," he thought, "and while he was trying to clear it, the line drifted into that patch of coral back there beyond the chain."

He studied the problem while he satisfied himself that his own lines were still clear. Then, with his mind made up, he signaled on his life line for more air. An answering shake of the line told him the lads on the air pump were obeying the summons. The current of air on his head increased its volume; the gurgling sound of the beating valves grew to a steady roar as the air rushed past the inlet valve into the helmet and dress.

He shut his exhaust valve and felt the dress swell around him. The face of the cliff sank past him; in a few moments he was standing on the lip of the precipice, the bubbles streaming up from the exhaust, which he opened as he reached the summit. The white streak was now before him, and a few yards away the diver was frantically tugging and jerking to free his fouled gear.

Weldon hurried across to him and tapped his helmet with the knife which he had drawn from his sheath.

Duprez's white face showed behind the glass ports in his helmet. His hands went out in a gesture of amazement as he saw the diver beside him. He leaned his helmet against the newcomer's, and called to him, the vibrations of his voice carrying through the metal shells.

"For God's sake, cut away my lines, mate; I'm just about all in. Hurry, hurry, for God's sake hurry!"

"We thought you'd snuffed out, Louis," Weldon answered. "Keep cool and do as I tell you."

"Jim Weldon!" Duprez gasped. "You—you're risking your life to save me after—after—" His voice choked with emotion.

"After you go down without a knife, you damn fool," Weldon interrupted.

"But—but you——"

"Shut up," Weldon's voice snapped angrily. "Every second is precious, blast you! You're caught like a rat in a trap, Louis, and if I try and clear your lines out of that maze of coral, it'll take so long that we'll both stand Buckley's chance of seeing the sunshine again. The tide's roaring in now; so I'm going to cut your line and pipe, and hook you on to my line. It's your only chance; and every moment's shortening the odds against us."

The current was almost dragging him from his feet as he spoke; the clumps of weed around him were bent and swaying like a grass patch in a gale of wind; he leaned against the flowing water and ground his boots into the coral to hold his position.

"Do anything you like, only get me out of this death hole," Duprez begged.

Weldon moved away from him, not waiting to hear any more. Two steps took him a fathom along the fouled life line. He drew his knife as he went. A slash of the blade, and he was back beside Duprez, knotting the cut end to his own line. He put his helmet against Duprez's and shouted, "Shut your valve; I'm going to cut your pipe."

Duprez obeyed.

The heavy blade slowly cut through the tough rubber and divided the layer of close-wound wire around the tube. A final slash and the air gushed forth in a stream of molten silver as the pipe dropped to the coral.

Weldon shoved the knife into the sheath on his belt, closed his air valve, and signaled for more air. An answering shake on the line told him Rooney was obeying the call. The steady sobbing of the air through the inlet valve above his head immediately became a quick gurgle. He could feel the dress swelling. It was time to leave. He reached out and gripped the line looped around Duprez's waist while he jerked his own life line once, "haul up."

The line shivered with the answering signal, tightening immediately as the willing hands above started to haul on it.

Then the sea bed dropped away and they were slowly rising towards the sunshine.

IX

ABOARD the launch Rooney sat by the rail staring at the water. Thornley was beside him holding the air pipe. The clock hands told them that fifteen minutes had passed since Weldon disappeared into the depths. Rooney had his empty pipe clamped between clenched lips; the older man crouched over the rail, an unlit cigaret in his mouth. Hardly a word had passed between them since Weldon's departure.

Duprez's tender was still standing with his master's life line in his hands, and his mate still sat stolidly holding the air pipe, while the lads kept the air pump turning.

The tide was swirling down the strait like a river in flood. Down in the hold the lads on the pump whispered that their master must now be dead.

"He has been down a very long time, so he must be dead," declared a big jet-skinned boy.

"But why does the white man from the *Nixie* risk his life in this strong tide to find a dead man?" asked one of the younger men. "What use is a dead man?" he added grimly.

"It is the madness of the white foreigners. I have been with them for many years," said the head boy, "and twice before have I seen white men do this mad thing. It is the white man's custom to play with death," he finished simply, and took the pump handle from the boy beside him.

The line in Rooney's hands suddenly swayed and jerked as the diver signaled on it.

"Pump up," he snapped over his shoulder to the pumpers.

The lads swung the handles faster.

"Easy now," Rooney called a minute later. He took in the slackened line, while Thornley pulled the pipe tight.

"Wonder what he's up to, Ted?"

"Must've climbed up a ridge, Sam; I've yanked in over five fathoms of line," Rooney told him, and resumed his gaze at the water.

The clock ticked off another five minutes.

Rooney's practiced hands felt the diver's movements, but he made no remark. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and called to Thornley, "Stand by, Sam. I can feel him moving round. Something's happening down there."

The line throbbed with another signal.

"More air! Pump, pump for your blasted lives!" Rooney yelled as he gave the line a long shake.

Thornley was on his feet ready to take in the slack of the pipe. He turned and called to Duprez's tender, "Look after your gear, Martin. I think he's got him, and—" He left the sentence unfinished and turned to watch Rooney.

The line jerked with the "haul up" signal.

Rooney roared, "He's coming up," as he gave the answering shake, and started to haul in the line.

Shouts of delight sounded in the lugger's hold, the boys on the launch adding their hoarse voices to the uproar.

The life line tightened as the weight came on it. Rooney spread his legs and hauled his hardest. The line came in slowly, but the task was more than he could handle alone. He turned his head. "Give one of the boys the pipe, Sam, and come and put your weight on the line," he called. "It's a two-man job to haul a man up in this current," he added apologetically.

Thornley obeyed.

The current dragged at the unseen weight, twisting and swaying the line until it seemed inevitable that it would snap under the terrific strain. Hand over hand, inch by inch, the sweating men gradually brought it aboard, while they strained their eyes to see what was on the end of it.

Rooney, bent double, reached down a hand for another grip, and saw a brown smear far down in the swirling water. Another few pulls and the two divers came into sight, the sunlight flashing on the glass ports in their helmets.

A stream of molten silver gushed up; Weldon had opened his exhaust valve to ease the air pressure in his dress.

"Easy on the pump," Rooney ordered as the two helmets broke the surface forty yards astern.

In a welter of diamond spray the two huge brown figures plunged and rolled in the rushing tide, the air from Weldon's open exhaust valve whistling and gurgling like the dying breath of some strange marine monster. The life line was taut as a steel rod, every strand and fiber of the tough manila strained almost to the breaking point.

Rooney shivered as he felt the quivering line.

"If a strand parts—" Thornley's voice trembled.

"They'll be cold meat," Rooney snapped.

They pulled the divers closer, playing them as they would a fish on a line, easing the strain when the current dragged, and taking in the slack when the pull of the water eased a trifle. At last they had them beside the ladder, holding them there while the boys reached down and passed lines around their waists.

"Got 'em both," Rooney shouted. He slapped Thornley on the back. "Thank God that job's done!" His face was creased with a broad smile.

Thornley nodded and rubbed his hands, which were cut and bleeding. "Spare me days," he grinned. "That rope's harder'n hell."

Rooney was hanging over the rail unscrewing the face glass from Duprez's helmet. He saw the ashen face behind the glass, and called to Thornley, "Get a drink ready, Sam; he's near out." He gripped Duprez by an arm and, with the help of the boys, hauled him over the rail to the deck.

"Don't remove his helmet," he cautioned. "Give him a few swallows of rum while I get Weldon aboard."

Thornley brought the drink and attended to Duprez.

"How're you feeling, Louis?" he inquired, as he held a spoon to the rescued diver's lips.

"Crook, Sam," Duprez's voice shook.

He swallowed another spoonful. "Wish you'd take this can off and let me get some air," he begged.

Thornley shook his head. "Wait a bit, son, until Jim's aboard."

Weldon's helmet was off now. He grinned at Thornley. "Got through real well." He tapped Rooney on the arm. "You must have enjoyed the last few minutes, Ted; it was quite interesting down our way."

Rooney smiled at him and swung the heavy weights off his chest and back, dumping them with a crash on the deck.

"Now this circus is over," he commenced, "it's up to the ringmaster to wet his throttle. Here!" He stuck a hand out, which Weldon grasped. "Come aboard, you big useless slab o' meat!"

Weldon laughed with him and clambered over the rail.

Rooney glanced at Duprez. "Head clear? No dizzy feeling? Feel all right inside?" he asked, as he squatted in front of him.

"That rum's bucked me up a lot, Ted. You can take the helmet off now; I'm not getting paralyzed this trip."

"Lucky you didn't get tangled up over there in the deep water," Rooney said dryly. "You know where I mean," he added, as he lifted the helmet.

Duprez flushed guiltily. "I want to thank you two for saving my life," he began, "and——"

"No thanks needed, Louis," Weldon interrupted. "You'd've done the same for us, so don't talk about it."

"But—but——"

"Here, have a drink, and stop gassing," Rooney growled, and pushed a glass into his hand. "Here's hoping we all get what we deserve," he went on. "You can't have a better toast than that, can you?" He winked at Weldon.

Thornley's gruff voice rumbled in the cabin.

"What about lifting the anchor and going over to Panamori?" he asked. "June'll be getting terribly anxious if I don't let her see I'm still kicking around." He laughed. "And I might tell you coves I'm feeling damned hungry, too, so just cut out the gassing contest and get into your clothes. What you say, eh?"

"Count me in, Sam," Rooney answered. He looked at his mate. "You're coming?"

"That's decided, so I'll get the engine going," Sam roared.

"Which decides for you, Jim," Rooney grinned. "Come on, I'll get your gear off, so you can crawl into your walking attire as we ramble across."

Duprez's crew were trying to haul in the cut line and air pipe.

Rooney called to Martin, "Send a change of clothes aboard here for your boss; we're taking him over to Panamori for a spell."

Thornley's gray head appeared in the cabin scuttle. "Bring his Sunday clothes, Martin," he boomed. "Mrs. Duprez'll want to see him in his glad rags."

Weldon started as if he had been shot.

Mrs. Duprez? June was married! His mind was in a turmoil. Married! When was she married?

"Mrs. Duprez?" Rooney asked. "I didn't know——"

"Of course you wouldn't know," Thornley cut in. "That was the lady June brought along." He winked at Duprez. "Some surprise, wasn't she, Louis?" His fat sides shook with mirth.

Weldon's heart sank. He laughed loudly. "You're a sly dog, Louis," he chaffed, trying to keep his voice steady.

"A regular oyster," Rooney chimed in, as he spun a wing-nut off Weldon's corselet.

Duprez smiled. "Yes, it was a surprise, Sam; I didn't expect her along until next month," he lied.

Thornley grinned. "And a fine, sensible lady she is, too." He chuckled slyly. "You'll have to walk a chalk line now, Louis," he bantered. He turned to the lugger. "Come on," he roared, "get a wriggle on you with those clothes!"

Duprez spat over the side. "I'm dead tired," he said, "so I won't be sorry to get out of this dress for a while."

Rooney glanced at him. "I'll fix you up in a minute or two," he told him, and went on unscrewing the nuts from Weldon's corselet. His head came close to his mate's ears as he did so. "It's up to you, Jim," he whispered.

Weldon smiled. He was happily rehearsing a speech he was going to make before very many hours were past.

X

DINNER was over at Panamori. A light breeze rustled the loose ends of the thatch on the lip of the veranda roof and made the hanging lamp above the table sputter and smoke. The fresh air from the sea was rich with the fragrance of the ocean and scented with the honey-sweet breath of the oleanders that thrust their bunches of crimson roses over the veranda rail. The stifling heat of the day had passed with the sunset; the night was pleasantly cool, a blessed relief after the long weary hours of flaring, white sunshine.

Thornley sprawled comfortably in a long, cane chair, a tall glass cradled in the chair arm, while he smoked a cheroot and watched the moon rise above the sea line. The old man was tired after his unusual exertions on the launch, which he had just graphically described to June and Mrs. Duprez.

"So you can thank your stars, Mrs. Duprez," he declared, "that you're not a widow." He laughed grimly. "If it hadn't been for old Jim and Ted, your old man'd still be reposing on the bottom of the strait. I've seen plenty close shaves since I've been knocking about amongst the pearling mob, but Louis's little performance today was the closest of 'em all."

"And we never knew anything about it," June exclaimed.

"Yes," Mrs. Duprez put in, her voice hard as a file, "we hadn't the slightest idea of anything being wrong." She turned to her husband. "You said you had to clear the anchor, and then you'd come right over here."

"Which he tried to do," Thornley answered, "but he forgot to take a knife down with him, like a—" he hurriedly corrected himself, "like a silly ass, and——"

"Nearly made fish bait of himself," Rooney cut in.

"Next time you go diving, Louis," Thornley continued, "you'll take a knife with you."

"There'll be no next time," Mrs. Duprez interrupted tartly. "Louis is going back home with me. I fixed that with him before dinner. The nearest he'll ever be to diving again'll be when he takes me and the children to the baths on Saturday afternoons." There was a ring in her voice that carried conviction.

Duprez was the picture of gloom as she spoke. He rose and disappeared around the corner of the veranda.

Rooney winked at his mate. "Poor cow," he was thinking. "No wonder he left home."

Thornley sat up and finished his drink. "What about a game of cards?" he suggested. He was tired of hearing Mrs. Duprez's pungent remarks about runaway husbands.

Rooney pulled his chair close to the old man. "Give you a game of cribbage, Sam," he invited.

Weldon glanced at June. "The moon's rising," he said, "and it'll be lovely on the beach."

She smiled at him. "Let's trot along."

Rooney was arguing with Mrs. Duprez

as to whether they should play whist or cribbage. Her hard voice was declaiming the merits of whist. "Just wait until I get Louis," she said, and called shrilly to him.

Weldon and June went out of the lamplight into the silver night. Side by side they stepped along the narrow path, the languorous perfume of the frangipani flowers all around them.

The beach was a crescent of shimmering ivory; the tide crooned its eternal lullaby as it caressed the sands with its sparkling waters; the moonlight dripped through the rustling plumes of the palms and penciled a lacework of moving shadows on the dew-jeweled grass.

They stood in the shadow of a towering casuarina and talked about the arrival of Mrs. Duprez.

"She's a kind woman, but used to having her own way," June laughed.

"Yes," Weldon answered, and looked into her eyes.

June turned away from him. "I must tell you, Jim," she said, "how Mrs. Duprez looked when we put her aboard of Louis's lugger. Poor Louis seemed to collapse like a man who's been hit with a club." She giggled. "Probably that's why he got tangled up in the coral, thinking about his wife too much and forgetting to keep his lines tight."

"Yes." Weldon was not listening.

"And when—" June stopped abruptly.

"And when I saw you at the island last week," Weldon interrupted, the words tumbling from his lips, "I wanted to ask—I mean, I was going to—" He was floundering hopelessly now.

"Talk about that big pearl," she suggested softly.

"Yes, that's right, and it's a beauty, too, June," he went on, and added slowly, "like you."

"Jim!" She looked up at him, her eyes shining in the clear white light. "Don't be stupid."

"I said I'd talk about that pearl, and I'm going to." He held her by the shoulders. "Didn't I?"

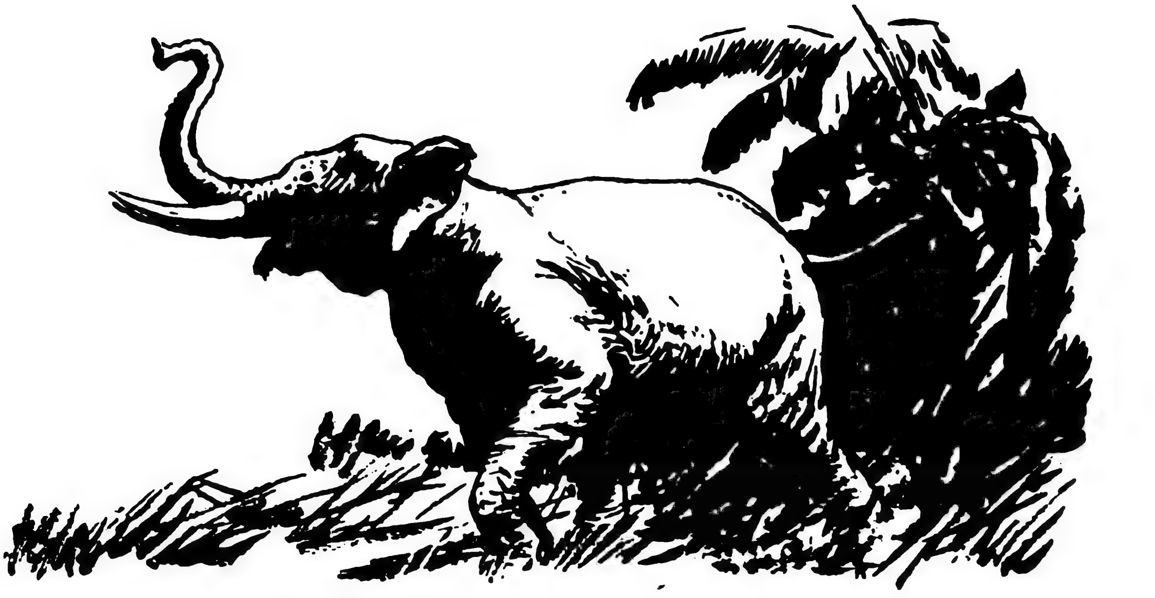
"Of course you did." She wriggled out of his grasp.

"Well, I got it, June, but it wants a mate. Will you—"

She came a step closer. "Will I? Oh!"

His arms were around her.

"Jim!" she whispered, her lips against his. Her arms twined about his neck. "Jim, you darling," she mumbled happily.



"Tales of the Teak Forest"

The Fighting of Giants

Of the Elephants and a Mighty Jungle Feud

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

JOHN HINTON, Forest Manager of the Siamese Timber Company, lay back in a long rattan chair in an attitude denoting utter exhaustion. The evening sun, shining over the treetops into his little tent, streamed softly over his features, revealing a face that was bronzed, rugged, determined, with eyes of a steely gray.

Nevertheless, in spite of his fatigue, John Hinton's brow was troubled, for the brain refused to relax long with the body, since many and varied were the problems that confronted him.

Firstly, there was the presence not far off of a rogue wild elephant that had killed two of his tame tuskers which had been peacefully grazing in the jungle. For four days Hinton had fruitlessly tracked the brute, till, worn out, he had given up the hunt in disgust and come to the conclusion that the rogue was lying up somewhere, sullen, morose, formidable, awaiting the return of its strength and the madness that would again cause it to become a menace to every living thing in the jungle of Northern Siam.

Then Poo Ten and Poo Taw, the mightiest timber elephants belonging to Hinton's company, were together in his camp once more, and the thought was distinctly unpleasant.

Now Poo Ten and Poo Taw hated one another. The trouble had started several years ago over an entirely worthless, foolish, coquettish little female that had been used as one of Hinton's baggage animals. On learning of the trouble, Hinton had promptly got rid of her to a Burmese dealer, but the poison had been sown, and thereafter the only method of keeping his two best tuskers alive had been to employ them in different parts of his forest, miles away from one another. This the white man had done, until the presence of an enormous jam of teak logs in the river which ran opposite his main camp, a jam that must be cleared at all cost before the next rise should occur, had necessitated the presence of his two best tuskers in addition to the remainder of his elephant force.

So now Poo Ten and Poo Taw were near one another again; but, Hinton comforted himself, there was no danger of their fighting during the night, for by his direction they had been securely shackled to teak trees on opposite sides of his camp, and not even their mighty strength would enable them to tear the stout iron rings asunder.

And yet . . . a sudden feeling of restlessness assailed the white man, and rising, he strode into the clearing that lay outside his tent.

Before and below him the broad river Me Nam gleamed faintly in the failing light of the evening. In the center of the stream, piled up tier upon tier, jostled the stack of teak logs that had been the cause of his bringing Poo Ten and Poo Taw to the camp. On the rim of the bank the Lao coolies, chainmen and mahouts crouched round their fires, their brown, half-naked bodies glistening in the flickering glare of the flames. Behind Hinton lay his own tent and the two smaller canvases of his headman and his boy. 'Round the clearing, save where the river bank opened the view, walled the jungle, dark, gloomy and foreboding.

On Hinton's appearance the Lao coolies ceased their whispering, shot furtive glances at their master, and then crouched closer round the fires. An atmosphere of stealth pervaded.

Yet the rapidly falling night was alive with sounds. From either side of the clearing Poo Ten and Poo Taw blared their hate of each other, and though he could not see them, in his mind's eye Hinton pictured their appearance. They were straining at their shackles, their little, red, pig-eyes gleaming wickedly; they were live, pulsating engines of destruction, bound fast by iron.

Other sounds pulsed through the night: squeakings, gurglings, rumblings, rappings, lashing of foliage. These sounds came from the other elephants of Hinton's force who, not being fighters, were allowed to graze in the forest unfettered save for loose hobbles round their forelegs which would prevent them from straying too far. But these animals also seemed to sense electricity in the air, for they were making more noise than usual that night.

Eventually, as complete, inky darkness shrouded the land, Hinton returned to his tent, and his brow was set.

Supposing Poo Ten and Poo Taw should break loose after all! There would be a fight such as never had been known before in Northern Siam. And which of the two would be the conqueror? There was nothing to choose between them. Each one stood nine fair feet at the shoulder, and each one measured a full fourteen feet in girth. Poo Ten had the longer tusks, it was true, but then Poo Taw possessed the more powerful trunk, and the weight of their heads, when it came to smashing power, was almost equal.

No, Hinton reflected, should there be a fight, neither elephant would prove the victor, for each would slay the other, and the net result of the combat would be a loss to him of his two best animals and a loss to his company of over sixteen thousand ticals' worth of elephant flesh. The outcome of such a contest would, indeed, be so certain that, whatever odds were offered, he wouldn't back either to come out the winner.

Backing the winner. Hinton started. He remembered the stealthy glances of the coolies and mahouts, their low whispering, the general air of pent-up excitement that hung over the little groups, and the more he thought over the affair the more he was convinced that some devilment was afoot.

For a while he remained motionless in his chair, as if carved in iron, and then he privily summoned the little headman, whose tent lay next to his. The headman, obedient to his lord's command, crept in by the back entrance and conversed in low whispers, so that none of the coolies on the river bank should be aware of his late visit to the master.

THE camp was hushed, and even the elephants in the surrounding forest had grown quieter. Round the fires the mahouts, chainmen and coolies sat still closer together. In the middle of the largest circle squatted Ai Noi and Ai Keo, the respective mahouts of Poo Ten and Poo Taw, and a smile of mingled greed and satisfaction illuminated their dusky features as they felt the large and bulky bag of ticals that bulged from within the top-slack of the garments that they called their trousers.

Of a truth they had done good business, very good business indeed! Had not every chainman, coolie and mahout contributed the sum of four ticals to each of them in order that they, Ai Noi and Ai Keo, might be instrumental in providing the members of the camp with the biggest thrill they had ever had in their lives, to wit, a battle between giants?

The amounts had been collected in utter secrecy, and came to the colossal sum of two hundred ticals, and with one hundred ticals each, what mattered if they lost their jobs? The Lord Hinton was bound to suspect them. Thus they had arranged that, after slipping the shackles of their elephants, they would flee to a far distant village, where they would start life anew with their gains. They pictured what they could do with one hundred ticals: perhaps a little more than one hundred ticals as a result of side bets between themselves. They could buy a wife, a small plot of paddyland, pigs, chickens, even a small buffalo. Yes, life was distinctly rosy. . . .

One of the coolies spoke. "The time is ripe," said he. "See, the Lord Hinton and the headman, they sleep."

All eyes turned to the distant tents. No, there was not a sign of light in either of them, and the time indeed was ripe.

Ai Noi and Ai Keo rose from the circle. "We go," they said.

"You go," whispered the others.

Like black ghosts the two mahouts slunk out on their errand. They chose circular routes to their elephants in order to avoid passing too near the Lord Hinton's tent, and, like Agag, they trod delicately.

MEANWHILE the remainder of the coolies, chainmen and mahouts crept beneath their banana leaf shelters and waited in pleased anticipation. Each one of them had backed, with what remained of his month's pay, either Poo Ten or Poo Taw according to fancy, and sleep being therefore impossible, they lay in dusky rows, every nerve alert for the uproar that soon should follow.

Seconds passed, then minutes, then one hour, and still the jungle slept in absolute quietude. Once they thought they heard a faint sound, and their faces lit, only to fall again in disappointment. After a while they began to shift uneasily on their backs. Had the plan miscarried? Or, a horrible doubt assailed them, perhaps the mahouts had done the dirty on them and decamped with all their money, leaving Poo Ten and Poo Taw still shackled. Brown faces creased with rage, and brown bodies wriggled with dismay. They would go forthwith to the Lord Hinton, they would. They would tell him of the defection of Ai Noi and Ai Keo, but—they frowned—how could they go to the Lord Hinton when they knew nought of the affair?

In hoarse whispers they debated the apparently insoluble problem till, just as dawn was flushing the Eastern horizon, the little headman suddenly appeared before their lines. And a glance at him assured them that he was a very angry little headman, for his close-cropped hair was bristling and his eyes shot fire.

"Sons of dogs," he thundered, "the Lord Hinton commands you to his tent."

He collected all fifty of them, blinking and bleary after a sleepless night, and in a sheepish mob ushered them towards the white man's tent.

For a full half-hour they waited there, shivering in the cool dawn wind, till presently the front flap of the tent was drawn back and the Lord Hinton appeared, dressed in jungle kit of khaki shirt, shorts and puttees.

"So," said the latter slowly, as he regarded the long line of faces before him, "so, instead of my camp followers being men, I find they are only monkeys after all."

Dusky feet shifted uneasily, and dusky faces registered pained surprise. They, the people of Northern Siam, had been called monkeys, an allegation that was incomprehensible, absurd, and entirely out of the order of things.

"Lord," they murmured after a pause, "we are *not* monkeys."

"Then why," Hinton put a hand behind him and flung two bags of silver on to the ground, "why did each of you give much money to Ai Noi and Ai Keo, who are undoubtedly monkeys?"

The serried ranks glanced uneasily at the bags. So the master knew all! Still —their countenances became fifty blanks of sullen resignation, and their mouths mumbled that they knew nought of the affair.

"And to think," said the white man in a far-away voice, "to think that each of you gave these monkeys twenty ticals apiece. It was too much."

At the words his hearers brightened. The Lord Hinton did not know everything after all, and had proved himself to be in the wrong at last.

"Lord, we gave only four ticals each," they said righteously in chorus.

"So you *did* give money to them?" questioned Hinton in mock surprise.

They flushed and fidgeted uncomfortably. The Lord Hinton had been too wise for them and they had been had. Here was extremely bad business.

"As the Lord wills," said one at last. "The Lord knows everything. He is all-powerful."

Hinton pointed to the money-bags. "The money," he told them, "will I give to the Fine Account of the Great Company. Thus the company wins, and you are the losers. And now," he waved an arm towards the jungle, "I will be kind. You are children, not monkeys, but try to be men instead. Get you to your elephants."

The mob, a very humbled, penitent mob, streamed off to catch their charges and lead them to the river, leaving the white man alone with his headman.

Hinton turned and, beckoning his companion, re-entered his tent. Inside were the forms of Ai Noi and Ai Keo, neatly bound and gagged. On the top of their heads were bumps, showing that on the previous night their skulls had come into contact with some firm and unyielding substance. In their eyes was a vacant look, as if they were at a loss to account for certain happenings. They remembered, indeed, bending over the shackles to unloosen them, but they remembered very little else. They had, in fact, been caught bending.

For a while Hinton regarded the forms doubtfully. To charge them formally in the distant gendarmerie station would mean endless trouble and expense, and, moreover, he could not spare the time to accompany them thither. He therefore finally caused the mahouts to be unbound, and after warning them that should they be found loitering round the camp he would have them flogged to within an inch of their lives, he drove them, penniless and humbled, from the clearing.

This done, he ordered the headman to procure two new mahouts from the nearest village for the purpose of riding Poo Ten and Poo Taw, after which he had a hurried breakfast prior to superintending work on the stack of logs in the river.

BY EVENING John Hinton had cause for satisfaction, for by working his elephants hard he had succeeded in straightening out more than half of the large jam of logs opposite his camp, and he reckoned that one more full day's work would complete the task. Yet, in spite of the good progress made, a strange sense of uneasiness filled his mind, for he felt as one who is on the verge of queer, terrible events against which it would be useless to fight. With an effort, however, he shook himself free from the shroud that enveloped him and concentrated his mind on the elephants which, knee-deep in the water, were pulling, thrusting and jabbing at the piled-up mass of timber.

An important key log at one end of the stack, which refused to budge in spite of the efforts of five large tuskers, attracted Hinton's attention, and he frowned, for well he knew that there were only two animals who had strength to shift that log, and these were Poo Ten and Poo Taw.

He waited for a while and then, after considerable hesitation, ordered Poo Ten and Poo Taw to the scene of operations. At his command the two leviathans, who till now had been working at opposite ends of the stack, turned and threshed towards the log, the remaining elephants making way for them as they came.

"Your goads," shouted Hinton to the new mahouts, and the dark-skinned Laos raised their great, iron-spiked weapons and held them threateningly over the foreheads of their charges.

But Poo Ten and Poo Taw were, for the moment, in no mood to attack each other, for there was work to be done. Obedient to the knee pressure of their riders, they braced their hind legs firmly on the river bed, and stooping, heaved at the huge bulk of timber with all their gigantic strength.

Next second the key log moved, and a moment later the logs above it toppled and crashed into the current. Poo Ten and Poo Taw, amidst the trumpeting and the roaring and the booming, fought mightily, as with flying trunks and flashing tusks they splayed the logs apart and sent them riding, like fleets of enormous matches, down the muddy, eddying current.

Soon three-quarters of the stack was cleared, and, as by now the light was failing, Hinton ordered his elephants to dismiss.

Poo Ten and Poo Taw heaved their bulks up the bank, and for a moment stood close together. They looked sullen and in evil mood, but, hindered by the ever-threatening goads of their mahouts, they made no effort to savage one another, and instead moved off slowly and majestically to their respective sides of the clearing, where they were securely shackled for the night.

As the last of the elephants disappeared into the gloom of the surrounding jungle, Hinton moved towards his tent. At the threshold he stopped and mopped his brow, for, in spite of the lateness of the hour, the heat was suffocating. The sky, instead of being a dark purple, bespangled with rapidly brightening stars, was a dull, drab black, and the heavy, motionless air hung like a damp blanket over the sleeping earth.

Soon Hinton found himself listening, but for what he hardly knew. Utter silence reigned; not an insect chirruped; not a night-bird called; even Poo Ten and Poo Taw, on either side of the camp, were quiet as death.

"The calm before the storm," the white man muttered to himself, "the calm before the storm." And, in spite of the heat, he shivered as he walked into his tent and shouted for dinner.

The meal over, utter weariness enveloped him, but he nerved himself to keep awake till he had sent for his headman and given him directions that, for the nights Poo Ten and Poo Taw should still be near each other, two chainmen were to guard the shackles of each elephant, receiving extra pay for doing so.

Having assured himself that the order had been obeyed, Hinton flung himself on to his narrow camp-bed and soon sank into the deep sleep of an exhausted man.

THAT night, less than a mile away from the camp, two dark forms were squatting in the jungle. They were Ai Noi and Ai Keo, once mahouts of great elephants and the pride and envy of the surrounding district, but now they were men without a job and of no more importance than the lowliest pariah-dog that ever sniffed round the garbage of a village market-place. They had fallen very low.

They had, however, one possession that still remained to them; this was, a common desire for revenge on the Lord Hinton, who had been the cause of their downfall. And well they knew that if they slipped the shackles of Poo Ten and Poo Taw and brought about the death of two magnificent elephants, though they would gain nought themselves, they would cause their late master much trouble.

"So," said Ai Noi, "the Lord Hinton thinks that because he has sent chainmen to guard the shackles, the elephants will be safe."

"But these are large chainmen," complained the other. "Have we not seen?"

"Fool," retorted Ai Noi. "Know you not of the *yang* bark?"

"Wooi!" exclaimed Ai Keo. "That is good."

Thereafter the pair worked cunningly. First, they sought out in the darkness a *yang* tree, of which there were many in the vicinity. From this tree they whittled off some of the bark, which they shredded finely. Next they fashioned, with the aid of their knives, small, roughly-made pipes out of the many bamboo stems that rioted all round them. This done, they waited many hours, and then they slithered through the forest in the direction of the elephant guards.

As they neared the clearing the pair parted company, one going to the left, and one going to the right. Soon they were within a few yards of their late respective elephants, whereupon they tied cloths over their own mouths and then blew from their pipes a well-nigh odourless smoke that hung, in lazy wreaths, a foot or so above the ground.

The drug worked well, for as yet the night was very still, and shortly the already sleepy guards rolled over sideways and sank into profound oblivion, whereupon Ai Noi and Ai Keo slipped the shackles and, after rejoining each other's company, fled hastily into the night.

A SOUND, as of the roaring of distant waters, stole into John Hinton's senses. He endeavoured to shake off the illusion, but it persisted, and eventually he struggled free from the sleep that clouded his brain and sat upright in bed.

As he did so a terrific flash of lightning whitened his tent, and a moment later the whole universe above him split into a thousand fragments of nerve-shattering, jagged-edged sound. While Hinton's head yet swam with the blast of the thunder, the surrounding trees roared still louder, and next second the wind and the rain were upon him.

He sprang through his mosquito-net onto the ground and grasped his center tent-pole, while round him the wind and the rain and the lightning and the thunder swirled and shouted and flamed and bellowed like a nightmare world gone mad with its own horror.

Two minutes passed, then a new note was added to the riot of sound. It was the trumpet of an elephant, followed by a screaming bellow that for a moment drowned the fury of the tempest. Followed a crashing roar, as if some tree had been knocked down by gigantic, straining bodies. A trumpet again, then the thunder blared and cannoned once more, temporarily obscuring the noises of the fight.

Hinton, leaving his tent-pole to fate, seized his electric torch and glanced at his watch. The time was three o'clock in the morning, which meant that dawn would not break for nearly three hours. He swore, then slipped quickly into his jungle-kit and strode out of the tent.

At the exit the headman rose up before him. "Lord," shouted the little man, "I fear for Poo Ten and Poo Taw."

"Take me to where they were shackled," the white man snapped.

A moment later, guided by the vivid flashes of lightning, they had arrived at the tree where the first-named animal had been secured. The shackles were there, but no elephant, and by them two dusky forms slumbered profoundly, in spite of the storm. Hinton flashed his torch on to the men, and shook them roughly. They opened their eyes, which were glassy, and looked at the white, round orb of light with expressions that were dazed, animal-like, and entirely devoid of human intelligence.

"Lord," said the little headman, "it is the smoke of the *yang* bark. I have seen it before."

"So have I," said Hinton grimly. "Now take these men back to shelter."

Together they dragged the semi-conscious chainmen back to the coolie lines, after which they visited the tree where Poo Taw had been shackled, where the same procedure was gone through.

Having seen all four chainmen safely under shelter, Hinton dismissed the headman and returned to his tent, which luckily had defied the strength of the storm and was still standing intact. There Hinton, torn with scratches, soaked with rain, senses almost buffeted out of him by the wind, sank into a chair and prepared to wait for the dawn.

There was nothing else to do. Find the fighters in the dark? Strain through the shouting thunder towards them? Separate them? As well might a gnat endeavour to separate two contending armies in the Great War!

Hinton leaned forward in the chair, arms across knees, and listened intently. The fight seemed to be rolling away towards his right, somewhere in the direction of the river, though owing to the uproar of the rain and wind to be sure of anything was difficult.

After some ten minutes of strained, anxious expectation, the storm passed as suddenly as it had come, and the noises of the combat became more apparent. Though Hinton judged that by now the giants were a good half mile away from the camp, the noise of the battle was terrible, unbelievable, the most awe-inspiring thing that ever he had heard. Crashing and crackling of trees knocked down, swaying and lashing of bamboo fronds, trumpetings, bellowings, stampings and roarings mingled together in one huge paroxysm of terrific sound.

Then suddenly a scream, as of some giant creature in its death agony, stabbed through the jungle night, after which all was silent save for the mournful drip of the trees.

Drip, drip, drip went the trees in the stillness that precedes the dawn, and a shiver went through Hinton's frame, for he felt so utterly alone. No white man was within one hundred miles of him, and all the decisions, all the burdens of the forest lay upon his weary shoulders. And he had lost this round! He sank his head into his arms, and age crept over him. If only he could get away from this wild, terrible land that up till now he had loved. If only he had someone of his own race to keep him company, even for one minute.

And while Hinton communed with his

thoughts, the little headman in the tiny tent nearby placed a small silver Buddha on the ground at one end of the tent. And he prostrated himself three times, saying "Great One, there are so many things that I do not understand." And he poured out two bowls of finely ground rice and placed them before the image, which looked at him pitilessly. And he remained in prayer till dawn.

AS THE first pale streaks of the coming day filtered through the towering stems of the teak forest, John Hinton and his headman set out on their quest. Their direction was pointed out for them, as in the pale blue, which now was cloudless, specks were whirring in long sweeps of flight. The vultures had come to seek their meat from God.

Guided also by the tracks of rent trees and bushes, they pushed on through the tangle, and, when they judged they were nearing the river again, they came to a small natural clearing, covered with bloodstains and littered with branches and broken bamboo stems.

In the center of the clearing lay the body of one elephant, and with bated breath they approached it. Rent, riven, torn and smashed as it was, it yet appeared of almost uncanny size now death had come to it.

They peered at the body, then drew dazed hands across their brows, for here was the carcass of neither Poo Ten nor Poo Taw, but of some strange elephant that was larger and mightier than any tame one they had seen.

Without saying a word to one another, they crept on and followed a slight trail that led away through the bushes at the further end of the clearing.

Shortly the river opened into view, and they stood upon the bank. Beneath them, knee deep in the water, stood Poo Ten and Poo Taw, side by side. Their friendship sealed by the blood they had spent in fighting and vanquishing their common enemy, they were squirting water in luscious streams over their wounds, and their great bodies rolled ever so slightly in an ecstasy of enjoyment.

"Lord," said the little headman, after a long silence, "I see all."

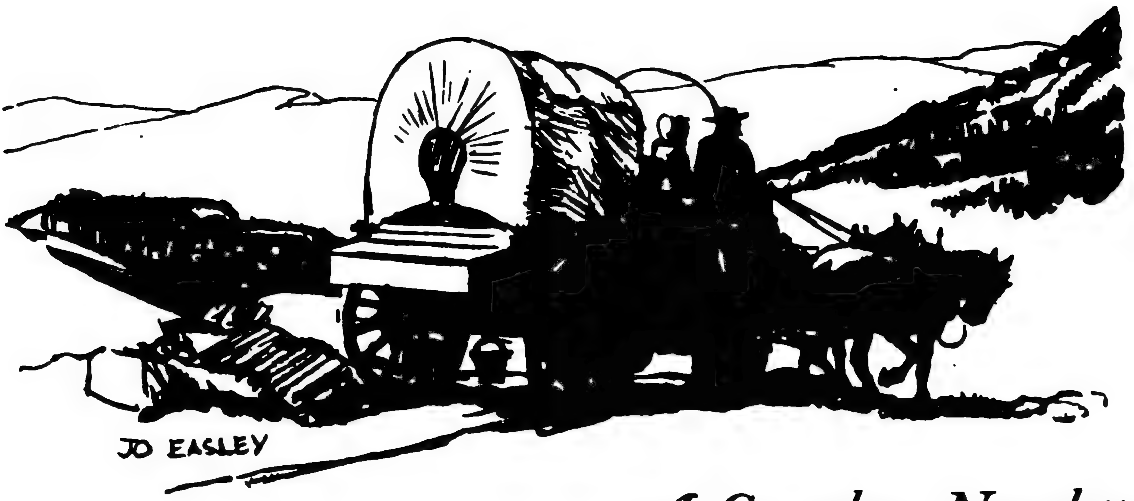
"Explain," said Hinton gravely.

"That dead elephant was rogue elephant. I think these last few days he lie up in thick bamboo clump near the camp, where you not find him. That why Poo Ten and Poo Taw sometimes become restless, sometimes become quiet and listen. They know he bad elephant and that perhaps one more day, perhaps two more day, the madness come to him again. They know he come and attack tame elephants and kill them because they hobbled and no can fight. Perhaps he kill even you, Lord. Then, last night, when they free, they go seek him out. Maybe he come and meet them halfway. Then they fight, they kill him. They very glad now, so fight no more each other."

"H'm," said Hinton dreamily. "Lucky those scoundrels loosed the shackles after all. It's a queer world."

"As the Lord wills," said the little headman meekly.

A Story of Steadfast, Hardfisted Men in a Lawless Land



A Complete Novelette

CHAPTER I

A HE-MAN COMES TO BLACK KETTLE

GABE ROARK was going west, or at least thought he was. At any rate, he was west of the Mississippi, and that was west of the hills of East Kentucky, where Gabe had grown up among feuds and moonshine. Luke Breathitt had left the old neighborhood five years before that—for reasons. Luke had written back that he had settled in the Black Kettle country and liked it fine.

Gabe's eyes got tired looking at the flat country of the Mississippi Valley. He could see too far! What would he do when he reached the limitless prairies of the real West? Nothing. He wasn't going that far. Luke Breathitt hadn't told Gabe in his letters quite all the truth about the Black Kettle country. He had particularly refrained from stating that it was a little neck of hell in the Ozarks that God had forgotten and the Devil was afraid to enter.

Black Kettle wasn't really a mountain. It was just a great dome of rocky soil, with three irregular peaks at the crest. Some pioneer who had seen his mother's washpot turned upside down to prevent the inside from rusting before another wash day had dubbed the mountain Black Kettle, and the name had stuck. In a land of real mountains Black Kettle would have been a hill.

Gabe Roark first saw it from the crest of another hill on a wonderful May morning. He had started early, hoping to make it to Luke Breathitt's home in the Black Kettle settlement by night. Gabe drove a team of fine, strong young Kentucky horses to a good wagon. The horses had been rubbed down until their coats shone and their shoes struck fire from the flintrocks of the stony road.

Gabe was in his early forties and a personable man. Tall, strong, with an intelligent face that had been handsome before the passing years began to carve lines in it. His hair was black, slightly shot with silver, and his dark eyes seemed to have the faculty of seeing through and beyond things. On the seat by his side sat his wife. She was one of those women with a broad forehead and level gray eyes, who do not scream when they see a mouse or a snake, and take few things for granted in this complex old world. She had undoubtedly been a wonderfully pretty girl.

Black Kettle MOUNTAIN

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

The wagon sheet had been put back from the bows, in order that they might "see the kentry and get a mite of fresh air," as they went along. Sitting on a quilt, laid on a box behind the seat, was Lorna Roark, daughter and only child. They called her Lorny. If there was any doubt that Gabe and his wife had been handsome in youth, their offspring dissipated it. Slender and issom as a young poplar, yet with the ardy, wiry frame of her stalwart father, Lorny had a face that would have moved en's hearts to quicker beating in any rawing-room in the land. Her hair was lack and slightly wavy, and from somehere back the ancestral lines she had inerited a pair of violet eyes that looked raight and frankly at all they saw.

As they reached the crest of the hill, abe Roark drew a long breath, inhaling e fragrance of the wild crabapple blooms at grew beside the road.

"Yender she is, mother. Look, Lorny. d Black Kettle! See the laigs stickin' p in the air, just like Luke Breathitt said his letter. He said we could make it a day, from where we first seen Black ettle. Um! This is God's country. ell the crabapple blooms and the wild ses. Like old Magoffin County."

A little farther on, the road descended a steep hill and almost ran over a little country store that was perched against the hill by the roadside. In order to be approximately level, the front was so high from the ground that it looked like it was rearing up in fright. Across the front was nailed a white-painted board, bearing the legend, in black letters, "Jack's Creek P. O." Two old men sat on the porch, playing checkers, and a younger man sweated the game. In the door stood a roly-poly little man, with sandy hair and smiling blue eyes. He was in his shirt sleeves and wore broad-striped web suspenders. He was bareheaded, which indicated that he was the storekeeper.

"Good morning, stranger," he greeted, as Gabe pulled his team to a stop and tightened the brake to keep the wagon from rolling on down to the creek.

"Good morning, sir," returned Gabe, pleasantly. "This is Jack's Creek I reckon, ain't it?"

"Yep, this is her."

"Where's Jack?" jocularly asked the traveler.

"Up the crick a ways, grazin' on a patch of redtop," replied the merchant, with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

Gabe went into the store and bought a pound of thin plug tobacco for himself and a pound of flint-stick candy for his wife and Lorny. That was a habit of his. Every time he spent money on himself, he spent some on his family. They returned to the porch in front of the store.

"How far is it to the Black Kettle settlement?" Gabe asked.

"Ten mile straight across. Twenty mile up and down and over and around the hills," replied the merchant glibly.

"What's the name of the next town?"

"Ain't none in that direction. They's a little deadfall of a store called Bee Tree —them danged heathen in the Black Kettle settlement calls it Beetry. They's a sorty post office and hitchin' rack there, and that's the end of the road."

Gabe climbed to his seat, loosed the brake, and the wagon rolled down the hill. The man who had been sweating the checker game got up, pulled up the waist of his trousers, and walked to where the merchant stood.

"They's a he-man goin' to the Black Kettle," said the merchant musingly.

"They's a few already thar," replied the sweater.

"Yes, but I reck'n you didn't notice this gent, partic'lar. He don't look big until you get up to him. Gosh! I'll bet he packs a wallop in them fists of his'n that would dang nigh turn old Black Kettle over and get it ready for wash day. Why, he's——"

"Yes, he looks like right smart of a man, but I wonder if he knows they don't raise nothin' but wild honey and hell in that Black Kettle settlement."

It was mid-afternoon when the Roarks reached Bee Tree. There was a long, narrow, weather-beaten store building that was built with the hillside, because the front would have been up in the sky if it had been built end to. That and a hitch rack of a heavy pole laid in the forks of uprights, was all there was in sight. A black, beetle-browed, bull-necked, fat man who was built like a spider stood on the little porch at the front of the store.

"Yep, this is Beetry," he replied to a question from Gabe Roark.

"Know a man in here named Breathitt?" was Gabe's next question.

"Luke Breathitt? Shore I know him. Friend of mine. You know him?" and the storekeeper openly leered at Lorny, as if he were addressing himself to her.

"Yes, we were boys together back in Kaintucky," replied Gabe.

"That's fine. Luke's folks is real quality. He'll shore be glad to see y'all. Luke's a fool about his friends. Do anything for 'em. 'Scuse me, my name's Reynolds, Pete Reynolds. What might yo'n be?"

"Gabe Roark is my name," replied Gabe, not particularly impressed with Mr. Reynolds, whom the Black Kettle folks called "Runnels." And then, "How far is it to Luke's place?"

"Foot or waggin?"

"Why, I aim to take my wagon, of course."

"I 'lowed the women might want to walk acrost the ridge. Some does and some don't. The road's right rough, around, and I could show 'em the trail." Meeting with no acceptance of his offer, he went on, "It's four mile by the waggin road around by Silomy Springs church house. Take the left hand at the foot of the hill and foller the main road. You can't miss it, less'n you turn around and come back."

Gabe thanked him, took the left hand at the foot of the hill, and went on.

"Sorty uppity, seems like," mused the merchant, "but old Black Kettle'll snatch that out'n 'em pretty quick. Gosh, that gal's pretty!"

THE road wound down a rippling little stream that seemed to be laughing about something, as it darted in and out among the rocks, skirting the base of the hill.

At the top of the hill Gabe stopped his team to rest them a bit and the three sat enthralled. In the midst of a great grove of giant oaks and elms stood what had once been a little white church. It was dilapidated now and sadly in need of paint. Through an opening in the trees old Black Kettle could be seen to the north of the church, its three legs picked out plainly against the blue sky.

"Ain't this a wonderful country?" asked Gabe in low, awed tones.

"Yes, it's right pretty," replied his wife, "but it seems like they don't keep their church houses up very well."

What reply Gabe would have to that

was not to be known. A young man on a great roan horse came splashing through the ford and rode up by the side of the wagon. He was about to pass on when Gabe called to him.

"Can you tell me what place this is, sir?"

"Yes, sir. It is Siloam Springs church and schoolhouse."

"Do you know where Luke Breathitt lives?"

"Yes. You take the left hand here at the church. The Breathitt house is about a mile from here."

The young fellow had raised his hat to the women and had spoken courteously. Lorny made the mental note that the Black Kettle country couldn't be so bad. That young man was unmistakably a gentleman. He had looked at her; to be sure, what man wouldn't; but it had been in a respectful manner. Gabe thanked him and started his team. The wagon turned into the left hand road, and he was lost to Lorny's sight, but she went on thinking about his fine form, his shock of sandy hair, as he swept his hat from it, and those calm, level gray eyes. The young man sat his horse, looking after the wagon until it disappeared around a bend of the road. Then he turned into the right hand road and went slowly on his way.

The young man was Jim Kelley, but the folks in Black Kettle settlement called him "Jim-or-Bob" when they met him. He was one of Old Squire Kelley's twin sons. In childhood the boys looked so much alike that no one could tell them apart but their parents, so the people fell into the habit of calling either of them Jim-or-Bob. It was easy enough now to tell them apart, though they still looked alike. The expression of their faces had changed. Jim was a quiet, studious fellow, who had been away to school, and was fitting himself to be a lawyer, he thought. Bob was typical Black Kettle folks, and already the drinking, roistering, and fighting was beginning to show in his face.

The Kelley twins at that time were about twenty-two, as like as two peas in a pod, and without a single thought or habit in common.

Gabe Roark was about to get a shock. He had made no allowance for the fact that the old neighborhood where he and Luke Breathitt grew up had taken several decided steps of progress since the clean-up that had caused Luke to leave there. He didn't realize that with the help of his wife and his lovely daughter he had far outdistanced the average in improvement. It didn't occur to him that Luke and his family might have come out to this wild place and suffered a retrograde movement in their development.

So Gabe was surprised when he stopped in front of a big, two-story hewed-log house to see a shaggy man get up from a chair on the long porch, kick two of the yelping, bellowing hounds out of the way, and come striding to the gate. It was Luke all right, but he looked rough. His trousers were in cowhide boots and belted tight at his waist with a narrow leather strap. He looked back over his shoulder, as he stepped off the porch, and yelled at someone in the house.

"Sal, you and Effie come out. Here's Gabe Roark and his folks."

A slatternly woman and a rather pretty, but not very neat, girl came out of the house. The woman's two butter-teeth were gone and the end of her sorrel hair stuck out of the coil on top of her head.

"Good land of love!" cried Mrs. Breathitt, when they reached the wagon. "If this ain't good for sore eyes. Why Mattie Roark! You look jest like you did when we left back yender. Jest as pretty as ever, and I look like the dogs hed had me. And little Lorny! A growned woman, and pretty! Come on in the house, if you kin make it fer the fetch-taked hounds," and she kicked one where it would do most good, and sent it howling under the floor.

The women folks went off to the house, the two older women walking together, and the girls coming on behind. Neither of them said much. Whatever Lorny may have been thinking, Effie was telling herself that she'd have to get busy to hold her place as the prettiest girl in the Black Kettle settlement, or rather, to hold Bob Kelley, who to her mind was the most desirable young man in the neighborhood.

"Let the women go on in, Gabe," said Luke. "We'll onhitch and put up. Yo' wagon'll be all right here. I've got a place that I think'll just suit you. Jines me on the west. My little woods pasture lays 'tween it and the road, but it's gated on both sides, and I'll give you a easement acrost to the road. Good house on the place, and all. Fellow had to leave here account of his health, and I bought it off'n him."

"Why, ain't this country healthy?" asked Gabe in some alarm.

"Oh, yes, it's healthy enough, in general, but that fellow had a special ailment that this climate ain't good for."

"Oh, I see," said Gabe, and he probably thought he did see, but he didn't. He was to think of that again.

Mrs. Breathitt asked questions faster than forty women could have answered them. The poor creature was starved for news from her girlhood home. So it was not until the men came in that Mrs. Roark had a chance to say:

"Effie, you've grown into a lovely girl. Where are the other children?"

"Toad and Bishop's down on the crick somewheres," replied Old Luke, without giving Effie a chance to answer.

"And Breckenridge, the oldest boy. Where is he?"

"We lost Breck. Jest gettin' to where he could help right smart in the field, too. Year ago last Christmas it were. Teechur said he thought studyin' his books too clost was what brought on Breck's last ailment. We ain't sent the yuthers none since."

They spent the evening talking about old times back in Magoffin County, while the Roarks gave the news of old friends and relatives. Effie gave many a sidelong glance at Lorny when no one was looking.

Next morning they looked over the farm that Luke wanted to sell them. There was a little field, already planted in corn, and more that could be cleared. There was a substantial house, with plenty of room. Luke told Gabe he could just pay him what was right for planting the corn and take over the crop. When everything had been gone over, including the price, Gabe took his wife aside and said:

"Well, Mother, what do you think about it?"

"It looks like a right good place," replied Mrs. Roark, "and it's certainly cheap enough. We got to buy somewhere. Folks that ain't—haven't got land don't amount to much. We couldn't buy our place back for what we got for it if we were there. We can buy this, and have money left. I don't reck'n we can do any better."

That left it up to Gabe. The deal was closed, and they unloaded the wagon. The Breathitts wanted them to stay a month with them, but Mrs. Roark said no. The sooner they got to work, the sooner they'd have a home.

Old Luke took a team and went with Gabe to Springfield to get the household goods that had been shipped out, including Lorny's piano. Effie had a twinge of jealousy that almost made her sick when she learned that Lorny had a piano and could "play it right smart."

Mrs. Breathitt wanted Mrs. Roark and Lorny to stay at her house while the men folks were gone, but Mrs. Roark said no, they'd stay at home. They always had stayed at home when Gabe was gone. And thereby, she planted a few seeds.

CHAPTER II

FLOWER SEEDS AND HELL SEEDS

THE first of the hell seeds to crack the ground and begin to show results were planted by Gabe Roark himself about a month after he had got settled in his new home. Luke Breathitt was there one day and Gabe remarked that he would have to dig a well.

"Dig a well!" said Luke. "Why, it ain't only two hundred yards to a good spring, and yo' women ain't got nothin' to do but pack water. 'Course, you know what you want, but if you aim to dig, you better get Smoot Shonts to witch yo' place, and tell you where to dig it. Smoot has witched every well in this Temptation Valley and ain't never failed to get water."

The people in Black Kettle settlement thought Smoot Shonts had a "power" when it came to witching for water. He always told them where it was, and within a foot or two of the depth. Smoot was the only man in the valley that had sense enough to know that there was a solid sheet of water under it at a depth of twenty-five to forty feet, according to the ground elevation. So Smoot had a snap, witching for water at ten dollars a witch, hunting bee trees in the summer, and varmints in the winter.

Gabe started his well at the back of his house, meaning to build a porch over it when finished, so his women folks wouldn't have to go out in the weather for water. He had gone down about four feet and was sitting on the side of the well, resting, when he heard a step and looking up saw a great, shaggy giant of a man, apparently about forty, approaching him.

"Are you Gabe Roark?" asked the visitor.

"Yes, that's my name."

"What the hell you mean diggin' a well 'thout havin' it witched? Don't you know they's places in this valley where they is water, and other places whur they ain't?"

"No. I don't know that and don't believe it. It's my well, on my land, and I thought I could dig it where I pleased."

"Huh! Dig it whur you please, and have a dry hole to fill up like a dang fool. I'll witch it for you, and it'll cost you ten dollars."

Gabe made no reply to that, but stood watching the water witch. He'd seen them before. Smoot had a willow fork in his hand. He took the end of one of the long tines in each hand, holding it so that it formed an inverted V, and began walking back and forth. Nowhere near the house would the point turn down, but out in a front corner of the yard it pulled until it twisted the bark off the stick. Smoot stopped, stuck his fork in the ground to mark the spot. Then he picked up a long willow switch he had brought along and taking hold of the small end with both hands, let it bend down until it almost touched the ground over the potential well. Then he counted as the switch throbbed up and down, each throb representing a foot of depth. He hadn't looked at Gabe, but he knew Gabe was watching him. Presently, he got up and went back to where Gabe was at work.

"Come out of that hole and give me ten dollars for saving you trouble. Down yender in the cornder of the yard you'll strike plenty of water at twenty-seven and a half foot. Where you're at, you can dig ontel you hear the chickens crowin' in hell, and you won't get a drap."

"I'm not going to give you anything," said Gabe, evenly, "and I'm going to dig a well right here. You can pull yourself together and get off my place as——"

"The hell you won't give me anything. I witched you' place and I want my money, you—" and Smoot let loose a string of obscene profanity and tobacco juice.

"Not so loud," cautioned Gabe. "My women's in the house there."

"Who gives a damn if they are?"

"I do!"

Crack! Something hard, very hard, the fist of Gabe Roark, in fact, collided with Smoot's chin. When Smoot came out of his trance, Gabe was pouring water in his face from the old red gourd that he had brought from Magoffin County. Smoot sat up on the ground, and batted his eyes.

"Whu—what hit me? Did I have a stroke?"

"Yes, a light one," drawled Gabe. "The first one is generally light thataway. It was my fist that struck you, and if you don't get off my land, and stay off, I'll beat the head off you. Get up and travel."

Smoot traveled, but Gabe had planted a nice row of hell seeds.

MRS. ROARK and Lorny had made flower beds and planted zinnias, marigolds, bachelors' buttons, touch-me-nots, and the whole category of old fashioned flowers from seeds they had brought from old Magoffin. They also had grown and burgeoned. The Roark place was beginning to look like a real home.

Smoot Shonts was not a stickler for truth in advertising. He circulated the report that he had gone to Roark's place to witch for water. That Gabe Roark had knocked him cold with a pick handle when he wasn't looking, then when he came to, had refused to pay him for his services and had run him off the place with a shotgun. This recital met with willing listeners, for it had long since gone around the settlement that the Roarks were "sorty uppity, with their piano, and all."

The slight altercation between Gabe Roark and Mr. Smoot Shonts had occurred on Saturday morning, and the general opinion was that nobody but a dang fool would start to digging a well on Saturday. The next day there was preaching at "Silomy Springs." Gabe hitched his fine team to the farm wagon, and he and his wife and Lorny went to church.

Whether interested in the gospel or not, there was a good crowd at the weatherbeaten church. The women and children and a few very old men were in the church. The men and boys were mostly outside. Smoot Shonts was among them. He glowered at Gabe and felt his chin, as the Roarks passed into the house.

"Dang his sanctimonious soul," he said, for the benefit of the crowd that was around him. "I'll fix his clock so it'll tick another way, first time we meet out in the open."

The crowd laughed joyfully in anticipation of the coming battle, and each one hoped he'd be present to see it.

It is much to be feared that Lorny's soul was not greatly benefited by the service. Among the few men in the church was the fine-looking young fellow who had directed them from Siloam Springs to Luke Breathitt's house that first day. He was sitting with Effie Breathitt and put in most of his time talking to her, though Lorny did catch him, once, looking her way. When the service was over, they met in the aisle, and with a simper, Effie introduced Mr. Kelley to Miss Roark, but she kept a firm hold on the young man's arm as they left the church together. She had probably heard that "possession is nine points of the law." But she need have given herself no uneasiness. Lorny was disillusioned. A close-up look at Mr. Kelley showed things in his face that didn't appeal to her. Besides that, he "talked in church," and that wasn't considered very nice in any country. So, while Mrs. Breathitt insisted on "making Mrs. Roark acquainted" with the preacher and some of the women folks, Lorny strolled out and stood waiting in the shade of a tree. There, the whole of Black Kettle passed in review before her, and she was not favorably impressed. She didn't realize it, but part of her dislike was due to her discovery that Mr. Kelley was not just what she had expected him to be.

While these things were taking place, Luke Breathitt plucked Gabe by the sleeve, and took him to one side.

"See here, Gabe, you started off wrong in this settlement. 'Course, I don't believe you hit Smoot Shonts with any pick handle, but——"

"Is that what he's telling?"

"Yes, but as I says, I don't believe it. Still, and all, you hadn't orter quar'led with Smoot. He has got a power when it comes to witchin' for water, ain't no doubt about it. Then, too, he's a powerful fighter, either with his fists, a knife, or a gun, and he's got a big follering. Smoot says he ain't goin' on yo' place again, 'cause you ordered him off and it would be trespassin', but if you don't pay him them ten dollars, he's goin' to sue in Squar' Kelley's court, and——"

"Who's Squire Kelley?"

"Who is he? Why, good Lord, man! He's justice of the peace, and the only court in the Black Kettle settlement. He runs things and runs 'em right. What he says goes. I found that out when I first come in here, so I stood in with him. Our families gets along all right," and Luke glanced off to where Effie was still hanging on to the arm of young Mr. Kelley. "If I was you, I'd pay Smoot them ten dollars and settle the quar'l peaceable."

"No, I won't do anything of the kind. I didn't ask Shonts to witch my place. He came there of his own accord. He insulted me, and I knocked him down with my fist and I'll do it again if he insults me again."

"But, Gabe! Smoot's got a follerin', and they'll gang up on you."

"I ain't never struck a man in my life when I wasn't in the right. Let 'em gang. I ain't never had to say howdy to the man that whipped me—yet."

"But you can't whip the whole Black Kettle settlement."

"I can whip as many as I get to, and that'll be enough. Mother and Lorny's waitin' for me, I got to go," and Gabe strode away to where he had tied his two great bay horses to a swinging limb of a big oak. Gabe took pride in two things, particularly—his family and his team. He was almost as proud of the flowing manes and long tails of his horses as he was of the glossy hair of his wife and daughter. He threw the hitch reins into the wagon, helped the women in, climbed to the seat, and started his team. Then he saw!

Gabe didn't swear. He had "joined meeting" at Hopwell Church, back in Old Magoffin, about the time Luke Breathitt's folks left there, and he'd gone straight. But a terrible oath that he had often sworn in his wild days belched up against his teeth and clamored for utterance. Someone had bobbed his horses' tails, short to the end of the bone! He stopped his team and glared back toward the church. The people were scattered in every direction toward their homes. At that moment, Gabe would cheerfully have undertaken to whip the whole of Black Kettle settlement, if he could have got his hands on them. He drove on, fuming with rage.

Luke Breathitt had gone to church horseback. The rest of the family had walked. Effie had managed that, so Bob Kelley would walk back home with her. As the Roarks passed, Luke stopped them, and insisted that they stay for dinner.

"No!" snapped Gabe. "Look at my horses' tails."

Luke looked and grinned, then his face went sober.

"Gabe, you've started wrong, I tell you. If you keep on, you're apt to have the same ailment that other fellow had that owned yo' place."

"You've mentioned that sickness once before," said Gabe. "Was it bad ketchin'?"

"Well, it looks like you've ketched it. It's just bein' onpop'lar around Black Kettle and havin' to leave—or do worse."

GABE drove on home, but there was no religious thought in his mind that day. He went on digging his well the next week, struck plenty of water at twenty-five feet, and should have been happy, but he wasn't. Every time he looked at his beautiful horses that old oath came gurgling up from his vitals. He had reached the crisis that comes in most men's lives, when they are likely to break their bonds, and go half wild, but Gabe Roark was of better stuff than that. He summed up that he had bought his land and had paid for it. He had wronged no man in the Black Kettle settlement, and he was going to enjoy his possessions in peace, if, like Gideon of old, he had to fight like hell to carry his point, presuming that the "Lord would be with him, even as He had sustained Gideon." If Gabe had gone a little deeper into his gizzard he would have found that his was a very human wrath, and the Lord had very little to do with it. In fact, old Adam and the Devil were holding a heated session in his soul. Whatever that may have promised, as regarded the salvation of Gabe's soul, it did promise plenty to the next man that tangled with him in a fight.

Saturday afternoon Gabe shaved, put on a clean shirt, and mounting one of the big bays, set out for "Beetry," to get the mail and bring a few things from the store. When he arrived at Bee Tree, the male population of Black Kettle was pretty well represented there. Some were pitching horseshoes on the only quasi-level place in a mile of the store. Some were trading horses, while most were just lounging around, chewing their tobacco and gassing. Among the loungers on the porch were Luke Breathitt, Smoot Shonts, and Jim Kelley. The last named young man sat apart from the others, quietly looking over some mail that he had just got. All activities ceased, when Gabe tied his horse at the hitch rack, and strode into the store, with a curt "Howdy, gents," to the men on the porch.

Now, there were plenty of he-men and good fighters in Black Kettle settlement. They fought one another; the best man won; and there was nothing more to it. Their mistake was that they supposed Kentuckians were all like Luke Breathitt —inclined to be politicians and know which side of their bread was buttered. Luke had worked right in with them, followed the line of least resistance, and now was the same as a native. So, as they sat waiting for the fight to start, they didn't know they were to see hell uncapped, right there at "Beetry."

As Gabe passed through the door, Smoot Shonts, feeling safety in numbers, and accordingly brave, raised his voice, as if continuing a conversation.

"Yes, they tell me they's folks back there in them copperas-dyed hills of East Kaintucky that don't know Christ has been crucified ontel yet. I reck'n that's so, too, judging from some that's come from thar lately."

Gabe had just passed through the door. He spun on his heel and stepped back on the porch. His voice was as smooth as velvet and cold as a frozen lake. He looked at Smoot.

"Mr. Shonts, don't you feel another one of those strokes coming on you?"

"No!" roared Smoot, springing to his feet and doubling his fists. "You ain't got no pick handle now and yo' wife ain't standing in the door holdin' a shotgun on me while you beat me up."

"Aside from being a crook, you're a

dirty, contemptible liar," said Gabe evenly.

"We'll settle that," stormed Smoot, "if you got the guts to fight."

"Where do you want to fight?"

"Out thar on the level, whar the boys pitches horseshoes, like men!"

"All right, get out there. I'll knock you half way," and Gabe drove his fist into Smoot's face, knocking him clear off the little porch. He fell on the sidling ground and rolled to the level, but Gabe didn't follow him. He had the wit, in spite of his rage, to remember Smoot's following, and he backed up against the wall, and said:

"Next gentleman!"

THAT was the starting of a fight that men talked of on Saturday evenings at "Beetry" for many years after. The next gentleman was the same one. Smoot had got up and was coming back for more. Black Kettle was obeying the rules. Besides that, Gabe Roark, reformed moonshiner and feudist, standing there with his back to the wall and the very blue blazes of hell in his eyes, wasn't pretty. Smoot Shonts weighed a hundred and ninety-four stripped and they had seen him fly off that porch, spread out like a scared bat. It was Smoot's fight, let him fight.

Smoot came up the steps, bellowing with rage, and blood dripping from a blue cut in his cheek. Gabe had struck too high, or he would have broken Smoot's neck. As Smoot reached the porch and charged for his enemy, he threw up his right hand and a knife glittered in it. Gabe took one quick step forward, and Smoot felt his right wrist caught in a vise, as Gabe caught it in his left hand. There was a quick, downward jerk and twist, and something snapped. The knife fell to the floor, just as Gabe's right fist found the button on Smoot's jaw. The big bully went off the porch again, but he didn't come back. One of the bones in his right forearm was broken, his left shoulder was dislocated in the fall, but it was some time before he knew anything about it.

Up to that time, Gabe Roark had been fighting merely as a matter of defending his rights, but when he saw the knife, he reverted to type and became a fiend.

"Come on, damn you!" he yelled. "Show me the man that bobbed my horses' tails, and I'll eat him."

Two husky young giants sprang forward, but only one reached Gabe. The quiet young Mr. Kelley thrust out a foot and the other one measured his length on the floor, as Kelley said, coolly:

"One at a time and fair play."

He sprang up, spitting oaths, and turned on Kelley.

"Who the hell dealt you a hand in this game, sissy? This ain't no place for little girls. Get out'n the way 'fore I pull yo' hair and make you cry."

"Try it one time," said Jim Kelley, evenly.

The big mountaineer tried it one time only. A fist as hard as iron, with a hundred and eighty pounds of steel and whalebone behind it took him where his head and neck joined, and only God's mercy kept them from parting company. As it was, the big mountaineer went off the porch and stayed off. He didn't know that while away at school Jim Kelley had become a boxer that was hard for any but a professional to handle.

By this time, they had ganged on Gabe Roark and he was having more than a man's work to do. Jim Kelley fought his way to Gabe's side, and said:

"Stand over a little, Mr. Roark, and let me get footing."

Gabe recognized this sandy giant as his friend, and he was beginning to need one. This threw Gabe near the end of the porch where the steps were. Side by side, with backs to the wall, they met all comers. Black Kettle settlement was getting the whipping of its history. The gang charged again and again. Man after man went spinning off the porch, and gradually they stayed off. The mighty fists of Gabe Roark and Jim Kelley were too much for Black Kettle.

The fight was about over, when Bob Kelley came dashing up the steps.

"Hey! What the hell's goin' on here?"

"We're having a party," laughed Gabe, "and I got your tag!"

Bam! Bob rolled back down the steps, his jaw feeling like a pile-driver had struck it.

Gabe turned into the door, now that the fight was over, and called for his mail.

"Get out of my place," ordered Reynolds. There was fear in his voice.

"Yes, I will. This is a government post office and it's open. Gimme my mail, you damned spider, before I pull your legs off."

Reynolds scuttled behind the counter, and handed Gabe his mail. Two newspapers and a letter for Lorny from back in old Magoffin. He put the letter in his pocket, took a chew of thin plug, and turned to Luke Breathitt, who sat on a nail keg inside the store. He looked Luke over. Here was a great friend. His lip curled in scorn.

"Do I look like I was ketchin' that ailment you spoke about, Luke?"

"You shore air! You started wrong, I tell you."

"Well, I've gone a bit too far now to turn back. If I'm ketchin' anything, it ought to break out pretty soon."

Gabe stepped out on the porch and saw Jim Kelley quietly putting his mail in his pocket. On the young man's face was an expression that puzzled Gabe. He seemed convulsed with laughter and unwilling to let it break out.

"Come, Mr. Roark," he said. "Let's go down to the branch and wash our hands," and the two walked off together. As they went down the steps, they saw Bob Kelley, still sitting on the ground nursing his jaw, where Gabe got his tag.

"Better wash your face and go home, Bob," said Jim, as they passed.

"Who is that young fellow?" asked Gabe.

"That's my brother, Bob."

"He looks enough like you to be your twin."

"He is."

"I'm sorry I beat him up thataway."

"He needed it as bad as the rest. He herds with 'em. I've been telling him he'd get what was coming to him."

When they approached the branch, four men were squatting down at the water's edge bathing sundry cuts and bruises. One of them got up and said:

"Howdy, Jim-or-Bob. I'm whupped to hell and gone. I aim to be on yo' side in the next fight that comes up, and yo'n too, Mr. Roark."

The other three followed suit. They shook hands gravely, and then Jim Kelley said:

"Now, boys, Smoot Shonts hasn't got sense enough to let this settle the matter. My advice to you is, if he starts anything more, stay out of it."

"We shore will, and they's more that'll think twice before they follow Smoot into another one of his easy messes like he said this was going to be."

Gabe Roark and Jim Kelley rode together to Siloam Springs, but they didn't talk much. At parting, Jim said:

"Don't think too hard of the Black Kettle country, Mr. Roark. There are a lot of good people here. Some of those that were in the fight were well-meaning fellows, like the four we saw at the branch. If anything further comes of this, you can rely on me. I'm strong for fair play and helping a man when the odds are against him."

They parted at the old church, each going his own way. Gabe had plenty to think of as he rode on home in the setting sun. The battle had appeased his anger against the Black Kettle folks to a degree. He knew they were not all bad. There were doubtless many good men among them. They were just primitive men, humanity in the raw, who knew how to use their hands, but had not yet learned to use their brains. Gabe had known such men before. There had been plenty of them back in old Magoffin when he was growing up. Indeed, in his youth, he had been such himself, and he knew there were some such in the old neighborhood where he grew up, even yet. What the outcome of the fight at Bee Tree would be, he had no idea. He would take no part in any quarrels that were not personal affairs of his own.

THERE was no preaching at Siloam Springs next day. Effie Breathitt stayed at home. She expected Bob Kelley to come to see her, but night came and he had not made an appearance. She was sitting on the front porch wondering over many things. Luke had told his family of the fight as a delectable bit of news. He had told of Gabe Roark knocking Bob Kelley down after the fight was over, and had made the comment that Gabe was crazy. Old Squire Kelley would eat him up for jumping on his favorite son. For some reason, Luke failed to mention the part Jim Kelley had taken in the fight, and Effie still didn't know Jim had returned home from a session at school.

"The idea of Gabe Roark laying his dirty hands on Bob Kelley," she was saying to herself. "I don't see why Bob didn't jest nacherly eat him up alive. Bob could do it, and——"

The sound of hoofbeats broke in on her thoughts. Bob was coming, after all. She looked out to the road and saw him in the gathering dusk. He was riding slowly along, but—he didn't stop. He passed on, opened the gate to the little woods pasture, and went on toward Roark's. Effie was aflame with rage and jealousy. She cursed the day that she had introduced Bob to Lorny. She knew what Lorny, with her pretty face, her uppity ways, and her piano, would do to her man. Effie was ready at that moment to do her bit toward giving Gabe Roark the sickness that would cause him to leave the Black Kettle settlement.

Lorny was at the piano, playing "My Old Kentucky Home." Mrs. Roark, calm enough in all things else, was surreptitiously wiping her eyes. The longing for her native hills, which had come to be a peaceful land, was showing upon her. Gabe had told her privately of the fight at Bee Tree, and she knew he had gone back a step. She knew he couldn't go raving mad like that without swearing grievously. The one work of her life had been to snatch Gabe like a brand from the burning and keep him from disconcerting influences. This country would take him back to his old habits and customs. These uncouth people would drag him down to their level. Gabe was sitting on the front porch. The piano was still going softly, and Lorny was putting the wail of a hungry heart into the homely old air, so no one but Gabe heard a horse come up the road and stop at the gate. The two women didn't hear him step off the porch and go out.

"I'm Jim Kelley," said the horseman, in low tones. "I came over to tell you that I have been looking around a little today, and have learned the next move that Smoot Shonts and Reynolds and their gang are going to make. They have trumped up a lot of charges against you, and are going to swear out a warrant in the morning. Lige Twomey is the constable and he'll come after you. Lige hasn't got hardly any sense, and all he knows is to do what he's told to do. I hope you won't have any trouble with him."

"Certainly not," said Gabe. "If he treats me right, I'll treat him right."

"You'll be tried before my father, and——"

"That's all right. All I want is justice."

"You won't get it. Father is violently prejudiced. He's a reactionary. He wants this country to stay just as it is. He'd like it better if it was as he found it when he came here, twenty years ago. I'll be there, and I'll do what I can, but I have no influence with father. No one has—unless it is Bob, and he'll be for the other side of the quarrel."

"Well," sighed Gabe, "tomorrow is another day, and we won't try to live it until it gets here. I'm beholden to you for coming over and telling me what to expect, even if it won't help me none to sleep tonight. I'm beholden to you for helping me yesterday, too. I was crazy mad, then, but I can see now they'd 'a' got me, if it hadn't been for you. Get down and come in. I want you to meet my women folks. I want them to know that I have at least one friend in the Black Kettle settlement. Don't mention that court business, please. They got enough to worry about."

It had grown so dark in the house that Lorny got up and lit the lamp. The first she and her mother knew of a visitor was when they heard Gabe say:

"Come in, Mr. Kelley. Let me take your hat."

"Mr. Kelley?" thought Lorny. "What can he be doing here?" and the next moment the young man was being introduced to her.

"I've met Mr. Kelley before," murmured Lorny, politely.

"Not formally, I'm sure," said Jim Kelley, with a smile in eyes. "I saw you the day you came to Black Kettle, but——"

"But I was introduced to you a week ago today, at church. You was with——"

"That must have been my brother, Bob. Church services at Siloam Springs are such a farce that I rarely attend them."

"Are you and your brother so much alike as that?" asked Lorny.

"You couldn't tell 'em apart in the daytime," interrupted Gabe, but Lorny knew better, now. She had looked into Jim's face, and it was the same kindly, frank, smiling face that she had seen that first day, and had thought of a thousand times since.

If anyone passed near Roark's place that night, they got no inkling that trouble was worrying any one. Jim Kelley had a fine voice. Lorny played and they sang old ballads together, while Gabe and his wife sat out on the porch listening and holding hands like young lovers. They were not talking. Gabe was thinking of court tomorrow. Motherlike, Mrs. Roark was wondering if that sandy-haired giant was the good man that his face advertised him to be, and if Lorny might fall in love with him. Lorny was all she had. She'd hate to give her up. What mother is there on earth that hasn't had such thoughts from the time her daughter's first beau called until the preacher said the words that took her away.

Effie watched long for the return of her lover through the little woods pasture. She meant to hail him as he passed and give him a piece of her mind. At long last, she gave up and went to bed, with the muttered remark that no decent girl would be sitting up until that hour, even if they were engaged. Had she known it, the man she had seen go to Roark's and whom she thought was Bob Kelley, was long since at home and in bed, having taken the shorter way to his place, across the base of Black Kettle.

"Gabe," said Mrs. Roark, when Lorny had gone off to bed, "do you think that young fellow is fit company for Lorny?"

"He's fit company for ary girl on earth. Yes, he's fit company for Lorny even."

"I'm glad you think so and I hope he is, for I think he'll come back, and I think Lorny likes him." There's no deceiving a mother.

Mrs. Roark was right. Even in that fleeting moment, when Jim had directed them that day at Siloam Springs, the barb had struck for both of the young couple, and tonight had fixed it firmer. It was a long time before Lorny went to sleep that night. Intuitively, she knew Effie was jealous of her. She smiled at the thought. She wouldn't have Bob Kelley on a bet, and Jim Kelley wouldn't have Effie Breathitt as a gift, if women were a billion dollars apiece.

CHAPTER III

ALMOST CONTEMPT OF COURT

IT WAS early next morning when Constable Lige Twomey came to Roark's house. Gabe knew who it was and went out to the gate to meet him. Lige was a self-important little runt of a man, who wore a gun because his office allowed him to and swaggered as he walked. Some wag in the settlement had said:

"If Lige was to drop that gun, his horse would think he'd fell off and stop."

As Gabe approached the gate, Lige dropped his hand on his gun and said, "Are you Gabe Roark?"

"Yes. That's my name."

"Well, I'm Lige Twomey, constable of Squar' Kelley's court, and I got a warrant for ye. Want me to read it?"

"No, I reck'n not. Just wait until I saddle my horse, and I'll go with you."

"All right," replied the constable, dismounting, "but I'll jes' go along and keep a eye on you," and swaggering through the gate, Lige walked with Gabe toward the stable. As they passed the house, Mrs. Roark came to the door, and Gabe said:

"This is Constable Twomey, Mother. He wants me to go to Squire Kelley's for a while. Something about that quarrel at Bee Tree. I'll be back after a while."

Tears started in Mrs. Roark's eyes as she turned back into the house. She had seen Gabe go away with constables before in the old days. He always said he'd be back in a little while, but sometimes it had been days before he returned. She had hoped those bitter times were past forever. She and Lorny watched them ride away. Lorny had never seen Squire Kelley's house, but she knew it was around the foot of Black Kettle, as Jim had told her the night before that it was only a little more than a mile, following the trail across the ridge.

Squire Kelley lived in a great old hewed-log house, two stories, and the largest in the Black Kettle settlement. A little way from the house, but in front and to one side of it, was a single room in which he held court. He had built it for that purpose. It was plain that the whole settlement knew of the trial that was to take place, for there was a crowd there when the constable and his prisoner arrived. Among them was Smoot Shonts, with his arm in a sling and his face in a mess, and Pete Reynolds and a gang of their followers. In a little knot stood the four men who had buried the hatchet and shaken hands Saturday after the big fight. Luke Breathitt was there, but following his usual custom, he attached himself to no faction. It was plain that he meant to take sides with the court, but say nothing. Lige Twomey entered with his prisoner, and the others filed in behind him. Squire Kelley, a great, shaggy bull of a man, sat at a table. He was well over six feet, rawboned, and strong as an ox. His fists, as they lay on the table before him, resembled two knotty hams. Bob sat at the table to act as clerk of the court. Jim sat back in a corner, watching the proceedings.

"Order in court," roared Squire Kelley. "Name's Gabe Roark, is it?"

"Yes."

"Yes, *sir*, or yes, *your honor,*" scowled Kelley, but as Gabe made no move to repeat it, he went on, "I want you to listen to these charges. Read the charges, Bob."

Bob got up and read a list of charges that contained everything they could find in the Digest of the Statutes and the Justice's Guide, including mayhem and assault with intent to kill. When he got through, the court asked:

"Got ary lawyer?"

"No, I don't need one. All I want is justice."

"That's what you're goin' to get, and plenty of it. What's yo' pleadin'? Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty of anything charged, except using loud and vociferous language in a post office. That's a Federal offense, and you have no jurisdiction."

"Hell, I ain't got no jurisdiction! You'll think I got plenty enough before I get through with you. We got witnesses to prove——"

"Anything," finished Gabe. "You can prove any outrageous lie on earth by Smoot Shonts and Pete Reynolds, and I have an idea you have other witnesses just as good."

"Order in the court!" thundered Kelley. "Mean to say you don't believe you kin git justice and a fair trial in this court?"

"Yes, I mean that."

"Why?"

"Because the judge is prejudiced and has already made up his mind, and the witnesses are a pack of liars and will swear anything on earth Shonts and Reynolds tell them to swear."

"What was it you said about the court?"

"I said prejudiced, if you know what that means. I'll add overbearing and unscrupulous."

"Oh, you will," and Kelley was white with rage. "I know what prejudice is going to mean in yo' case. It's goin' to mean a hundred-dollar fine for contempt of court. Put it down, Bob."

"Better make it two hundred," said Gabe, the little blue blazes beginning to show in his eyes, "for I haven't expressed half the contempt I've got for this court, and I mean to do it before I get through. I'll start by saying you possess the chief qualifications of a justice of the peace, which is total and absolute ignorance of the law, and—haven't sense enough to know it. You're——"

"Stop!" roared Kelley. "I can fine you for contempt of court, but I can't fine you for abusing me. It wouldn't do me no good. You say you ain't satisfied with the kind of justice I give in court. We'll step outside, and I'll show you what kind of justice I give out of court."

"All right, let's go."

SQUIRE KELLEY was about fifty years old, but he was no weakling. He had lived in the open all his life. A thousand times he had climbed old Black Kettle with his hounds on the chase. He was supple in his joints, and had the thews and sinews of an ox. There had never been a man in Black Kettle settlement who could stand before him, either in a fist fight or wrestling bout. He had always prided himself on being the best man in the settlement and still did.

Mrs. Kelley, a frail, delicate little woman, saw the crowd come surging out of the courtroom and form a ring. She took one look and with blanched face went to her room and closed the door. Too often she had seen her husband mete out justice in that manner. Too often, she had seen the victim of his rage go confidently to the combat, only to be taken up, a bruised and broken thing. Sometimes maimed for life, and once, to live but a few months.

There was no preliminary fencing for an opening. The fight began as soon as the two men were on the ground. Inside of two minutes Gabe Roark had hit Kelley in the face a dozen times without shaking him, and Kelley had knocked Gabe down twice.

"How do you like it?" jeered the jurist. "Run into a man this time, ain't you? I'll make dog meat of you, and feed you to my hounds."

The squire had made a mistake. Talking and fighting don't go very well together. All he knew about fighting was bull strength and awkwardness. He was fighting a man that knew a number of tender spots on the body. Give Gabe Roark a little time, and he could beat a horse to death with his fist. He was thirty pounds too light to fight Kelley, but he was game. As the Squire finished his remarks, Gabe sent a blow to his solar plexus that would have floored an ox. Kelley went white and staggered back a step or two. Gabe went in and was cutting Kelley's face to ribbons, when Bob yelled:

"Let me at him. I won't see him butcher dad up that way."

"You'll get into that mess after you pass me," said Jim coolly. "Dad asked for it, let him have it. He'll probably know when he's got enough better than you would."

Kelley's face was puffing horribly, and his breath was coming in gasps. Gabe was going at it methodically to beat him to death with body blows, since he was too tall to be knocked out with any blow to his head. Over the kidney, heart, anywhere that damage could be done, Gabe kept pounding away. Kelley tried to grapple, but every time Gabe stepped out of the way and struck him a stinging blow. Kelley began to weaken. His shoulders drooped, his eyes were almost closed. He had ceased getting his blows home, and was groping blindly for his antagonist, hoping to crush him in a bear-hug, as a last resort. His knees were sagging and his head hung forward.

Gabe was reeling as he fought. He put the last ounce he had into one mighty swing. It landed fair on Kelley's chin, and the old giant, victor in a hundred great battles, crumpled slowly to the ground. The greatest fight that the old courthouse ever knew, and the last one, had ended. Jim Kelley picked up a bucket of water that someone had brought to throw on Gabe Roark, when Kelley had half killed him, and poured it on his father's face.

Squire Kelley gasped a time or two and sat up on the ground.

"Keep that damned water out of my face!" he roared. "Where's Roark?"

"Here I am," said Gabe, as he stood trembling in every limb, nearer spent than he had ever been in all his life.

Old Squire Kelley tottered to his feet and started weaving toward the voice. Gabe tried to set himself for battle again, wondering if he would have to kill the old fool. Instead of renewing the fight, Kelley said:

"I may be an old fool, Roark, like you said I was, but I got sense enough to know when I'm licked. Shake hands and call it square."

Gabe took the groping hand in the best grip he had left, and winced as Old Squire Kelley crushed his hand. That was the grip of two men that were to die friends, with never another quarrel.

"Court's adjourned, all fines remitted and all charges dismissed!" bellowed Old Judge Kelly. "If any other man in the settlement ever picks another quarrel with Gabe Roark, I'll fine him so damned much —if he lives—that his grandchildren won't get it half paid."

SMOOT SHONTS and Pete Reynolds were the only two in that motley crowd who were not satisfied with the verdict. They stood together at one side, muttering in low tones. They had not given up the fight on Gabe Roark, in spite of that trial by brute strength, in which Gabe had won again. They had set an anchor to windward, in case of a miscarriage of what they were pleased to consider justice in this controversy.

Jim Kelly brought a bucket of salt water for his father to bathe his battered face and hands, but upon looking at the ruin Gabe had made of the squire, he said:

"You'd better let us help you in the house, dad, so mother can take care of you."

"No. I'll be all right in a little while," protested Kelley.

The Black Kettle men were standing about, looking at the old giant's face in wonder, and casting glances at Gabe Roark. So intent were they on the sight before them that no one heard a light footstep come swiftly across the yard from the gate. It was Lorny Roark. Her face was flushed with running, and she was more beautiful than she had ever been in her life, as she cried out, breathlessly:

"Daddy, daddy! The woods lot—west of our house—is burning. The fire is almost to the house. Come, quick!"

It seemed to happen in a second. Lorny never knew just how it was. She was sitting in the saddle on a great roan horse, with an arm passing on each side of her, and the hand gripping the saddle horn. The wind fanned her face, and she swayed in the saddle as the big roan flew along the trail with its double burden, straight for the Roark home, with Gabe's big bay thundering close at its heels. Either way Lorny swayed, she fell against a mighty arm that was as rigid as a steel beam.

On went the big roan, clearing ditches at a bound, straight for that curtain of smoke that rose beyond the Roark home. The flames, feeding on the thick carpet of leaves and dry grass, were within a hundred feet of the old rail fence that surrounded the house and barns. There had been no rain for weeks. Not even a heavy dew. The hot summer sun had made the grass dry as tinder, and a west wind was sweeping the flames steadily forward. Jim Kelley pulled the big roan to a stop, and, dismounting, lifted Lorny to the ground. It was then that Jim saw a sight that tightened his throat as no fight between battling giants could ever do. Mrs. Roark was fighting the fire with a wet grain sack. Her hair had come uncoiled, and was hanging down her back. He saw Lorny grab another sack out of a bucket of water, and go to the the battle. These two women that the Black Kettle folks had called "uppity," this girl, whose white hands played the piano so beautifully, out there fighting to save their home. "God! Old Magoffin County ought to be proud of producing such women!" was his thought.

Jerking the saddle from his horse, Jim wet the saddle blanket, and went into the battle himself. He swung the wet blanket aloft, and Lorny caught a glimpse of him through her flying hair, as she raised her head out of the smoke to get a gulp of fresh air. Down came the blanket, swung by those mighty arms, and snuffed out a great swath of flame. She caught her breath, and went on fighting with renewed hope. Something seemed singing in her ears: "Jim is here, now, and we'll win!"

Gabe Roark had slid from his horse, still weak and trembling from his battle with old Squire Kelley. He followed Jim's example, and with his saddle blanket went to the front. They had whipped out the flames immediately in front of the house and barns, but a little farther north of them, and where it could still win to the house, the fire was crackling in the corners of the fence. Smoke was choking them. Their lips were parched, their eyes stung, and fire was springing up again where they thought they had put it out. Any gust of wind might undo what they had done, and lose all.

Four horsemen came pelting along the trail. It was the four men who had shaken hands with Gabe and Jim after the fight at Bee Tree. They sprang to the ground at a point where the fence was already blazing, and waded into the flames. They tore the fence down, and threw the blazing rails far out into the burning woods. They worked like demons, regardless of scorching clothing and blistered hands.

In five minutes, the battle at Roark's place was won. All they had to do now was to watch for little flames that the wind fanned up in places that they had fought over, and stamp them out. The wind veered to the south, and that would help them, though it rose to a gale. Gabe said:

"Men, I'm beholden to you. If you hadn't come when you did, we'd have lost our home."

"That's all right, Mr. Roark," said the spokesman of the quartet, as he opened a huge blister on one of his hands. "We'd be dang pore men if we wouldn't fight for folks that fights for theyselfs like you and yo' women does. We're glad we got here in time."

"Listen!" cried Lorny, who, unmindful that the collar of her dress was torn open, baring her wonderful neck and throat, her face flushed with fighting and with victory, stood looking at Jim Kelley.

They listened, and heard a mighty roaring, and saw a great curtain of smoke rising to the north of them.

"Good Lord!" said one of the four men. "She's goin' up old Black Kettle!"

"Let it go," said Jim Kelley. "We can't stop it, and it might be a good thing to have that nest of hell burnt out once."

The Roarks looked at him in wonder. They knew nothing of anything that could be in Black Kettle Mountain, except varmints that had preyed on their chickens. The other men said nothing, and they all stood in a group, watching the flames leap up the south side of the mountain like wild horses, and listening to the crackling roar.

BLACK KETTLE MOUNTAIN belonged to old Squire Kelley. There were several thousand acres in the tract, and he had not permitted it to be burnt over for years. It was his hunting ground, and he said he wanted it to stay just as it was. Grass, leaves and fallen timber had accumulated on the ground, and made a wonderful feast for the hungry flames. No power on earth could have checked that fire, except a deluge of rain, and the brassy skies gave no promise of that.

Back at Squire Kelley's place the crowd still stood around the broken old jurist. Even Luke Breathitt had stayed to minister to him, rather than go to the aid of Gabe Roark. Kelley was whipped, and had taken it like a man, but he would always be a power in the Black Kettle settlement. Something told Luke that the quarrel was not over yet, and that Gabe would finally get such an attack of the ailment he had told him about, that he'd have to leave the country. He didn't want to get in bad by taking Gabe's side at the critical moment. He was permanently settled there, and there was good promise that he and Squire Kelley would one day be the grandfather of the same children. Luke, with the others who had stayed behind, were suddenly startled by a terrific roaring. The old squire stopped bathing the swollen slits of his eyes, and said:

"What's that, boys?"

"Fire on Old Black Kettle," said one of the men, looking off toward the mountain.

"Fire? Good God! It'll ruin my hunting ground. Which way is it going?"

"Coming up from the south side."

"Come on! We can fire agin it, up Coon Hollow on this side, and down Panther Branch on yan side, and save half of it."

Kelley rose, tottered forward a few steps, and stopped. "Oh, hell and damnation! I can't see my way. Go on, damn you! Set back-fires up Coon Hollow, and down—" he wavered and sat down on the ground, where he could hear the men scampering away to carry out his orders. But, they would set no back-fires along Coon Hollow and Panther Branch. No living man could follow the course of those two draws that headed together at the kettle-legs, and ran over the great dome like an equator. Besides that, there was other work to be done.

The foot of the mountain came down to within two hundred yards of the Kelley home, immediately to the west of the house. Between the house and the mountain were woods, thickly carpeted with leaves and grass. With a high wind from the mountain, fire would fall all over the Kelley home, and that was what was about to happen.

As the Roarks and their friends stood looking and listening, the gale of wind suddenly died out. A minute later it rose from the west with a shriek, and swept across the course of the flames.

"That'll take it to Squar' Kelley's house," said one of the men.

Jim Kelley, who stood looking at Lorny, and thinking of nothing else on earth, started violently at the words:

"You can get along without me now, Mr. Roark," he said, and springing to the bare back of his horse was gone, with the other four men at his heels.

"Mother and I can watch the fire here. Go with Jim, daddy! Please go!" pleaded Lorny, and Gabe Roark went.

Back-fires were set, a mile of them, but they were set along the eastern base of Black Kettle Mountain to save old Squire Kelley's home, and at that the men had to fight for hours. Time and again great burning faggots came soaring from the fiery mountain, and fell in the woods near the house. One fell in the yard, and was put out by the delicate little Mrs. Kelley, who was calm in spite of the impending danger.

There were a few old cabins on the mountain, but it was not generally known that anyone lived there. In the midst of the fire-fighting, two men came tearing out of the flames, scorched and bleeding. They were two fellows that loafed about the store at Bee Tree a good deal of the time, and did odd jobs for Pete Reynolds. As soon as they got a good breath, they ran up to Pete Reynolds, who stood watching the fire, and doing very little.

"The outfit'll be burnt up, Pete!" cried one of them. "The cabin was afire when we left, and——"

"Shut up, you damned fool!" snapped Reynolds. "Let it burn. If these people find out what we know, we'll be burning up—in hell—in about five minutes."

Pete Reynolds went on watching the fire, after the fellow slunk away to hunt water. There was an odd expression on Pete's spider face. He looked as if he were trying to decide whether to stand his ground, or run. If he had known that Jim Kelley had seen those men come out of the burning mountain, and run straight to him; if he had known how much Jim knew about what was at the spring, just below the west leg of the Old Black Kettle; if he had known that Jim had been wondering just how that fire started—he would have decided to run, for the old squire had nothing on Jim, when the boy was enraged. The difference was that Jim became enraged over a different sort of things, and could control his temper when he wanted to.

Bob Kelley had fought the fire as bravely as any man there. He had been rapidly going to the dogs, but he was a real man under the rough coat that he had put on from bad habits and evil associations. Never again would the people of Black Kettle settlement have to say "Jim-or-Bob." When that ocean of flame that came roaring across the mountain met the back-fires, it rose high in the air. A burning stick, carried up by the terrible heat, fell on Bob's neck, and caught in the open collar of his shirt. He plucked it out with his bare hand, but not until it had seared the skin so deep that there would always be a livid scar on his neck. Bob was going through the furnace, and a thing was about to happen that would consume the last atom of dross in his character.

THE fire had burned out, and the men had gathered about the old courtroom, in Squire Kelley's yard. They had washed up, and were resting a while before going to their homes. Smoot Shonts, Reynolds, and the two men who had come out of the burning mountain, got up and started away together.

"Wait a minute, boys," said Jim Kelley, who had scarcely spoken a word since they had returned to the house. "Come back here. I want to talk to you."

They hesitated a moment, then turned and walked doggedly back.

"Make a ring around them, fellows, and see that none of them get away until I tell them to go."

With questioning eyes, the men sprang to their feet, and instantly the four men found themselves in a circle, there in front of the old courthouse, where Gabe and the squire had fought. There was about to be another trial.

"What's the joke about this?" snarled Smoot Shonts.

"I'll tell you in a minute," replied Jim, and turned to one of the men who had come out of the mountain. "Early Bowman, I've known you all your life, and you never did amount to anything, but you're going to tell me the truth, now, or be sorry you didn't. You and Dave Huff set the woods afire west of Mr. Roark's house, this morning. You don't have to tell me that. What I want you to tell me is why you did it?"

"Why—we——"

"Don't answer him, Early!" broke in Smoot Shonts. "This ain't no court, and Jim Kelley ain't no squar'."

"If you interrupt again, I'll have you gagged. Go on, Early. Tell me why you did it."

"Why, Smoot and Pete, they—" Reynolds made a noise in his throat, and the boy stopped.

"Go on. Tell me. My patience will give out directly, and when it does——"

"Why, they—they gives me and Dave ten dollars apiece to set it, and we did, and then——"

Smoot and Pete whirled and started to run, but they didn't get far. They hadn't gaged the temper of the men who had been fighting that fire, and who were beginning to see a great light. The four were caught, and roughly held.

"Hang 'em," yelled some one. "I'll get a rope!"

"Never mind!" said Jim Kelley, coolly. "Just hold them, I'll issue the verdict, and I'll make it stick. I've known for some time that you fellows were making moonshine over by the west leg. Good whisky don't hurt people much, maybe. I have drank some, and it didn't seem to hurt me. The kind you make is poison, and makes men crazy, but we'll let that pass. The government can take care of its own moonshiners. This morning, the four of you have been potential murderers. If it hadn't been for these brave fellows here, you would have destroyed at least two homes, and probably have taken life. I don't want to see you hang. I don't want the clean air of the Black Kettle settlement, where decent people have to live, polluted by having your filthy carcasses swinging in it. I don't want you here alive, either. If you are anywhere in reach of this settlement twenty-four hours from now, I'll turn you over to the Federal authorities on a charge of moonshining, and to the State authorities on a charge of arson, and attempted murder. Let 'em go now, boys."

The four were turned loose, and they went. They didn't require the twenty-four hours to get out of the settlement. They could read men's faces as well as anyone could, and they knew Jim Kelley would make that verdict stick, as he said he would, and that the rest of the settlement would back him.

"Now, boys," continued Jim, "you see what you've been harboring. They've been ruining the young fellows. We have the finest country in the world, here in these hills. Wonderful timber, fine water, and rich farm land in the valleys. All we have to do is to get down to work, and make it a place fit to live in, instead of a neck of hell that God has forgotten, and the Devil's ashamed to enter."

Some one yelled, "Hooray for Jim Kelley!" Half a dozen started to speak at once, but when old Squire Kelley, who had been sitting on the ground bathing his eyes, and hearing everything, roared out, they all stopped.

"Jim, I couldn't 'a' done that," said the squire. "I'd a' hung 'em, shore as hell, damn 'em, and I'd 'a' done wrong. You done the right thing, and I know you'll make it stick. I aim to resign at the next election, and let the people elect you squar' of old Black Kettle."

A cheer went up, and a dozen of the leading men of the settlement grasped Jim's hand and pledged their support, swearing they'd back him the limit, for anything he wanted from justice to governor. He wouldn't have to stand alone any more.

"I don't know, boys," said Jim. "I may go into a law office in Springfield, but I'll never forget your kindness, and your willingness to back me. If I stay here, you can call on me, any time, for anything you want. I want to thank you again, for the help you gave us in fighting the fire."

The men left, and pretty soon afterward Gabe Roark departed for his home. Jim Kelley turned to the old log house that had always been his home, and where he really wanted to live, for his heart was there in the hills. The friendship expressed by the hard-handed men of the Black Kettle settlement had moved him greatly, for he had not expected it. They had never had anything in common before. A real lump came to his throat a few minutes later. At the door of the old house he met his brother Bob, with his neck bandaged. Bob put out his hand, and gripped Jim's.

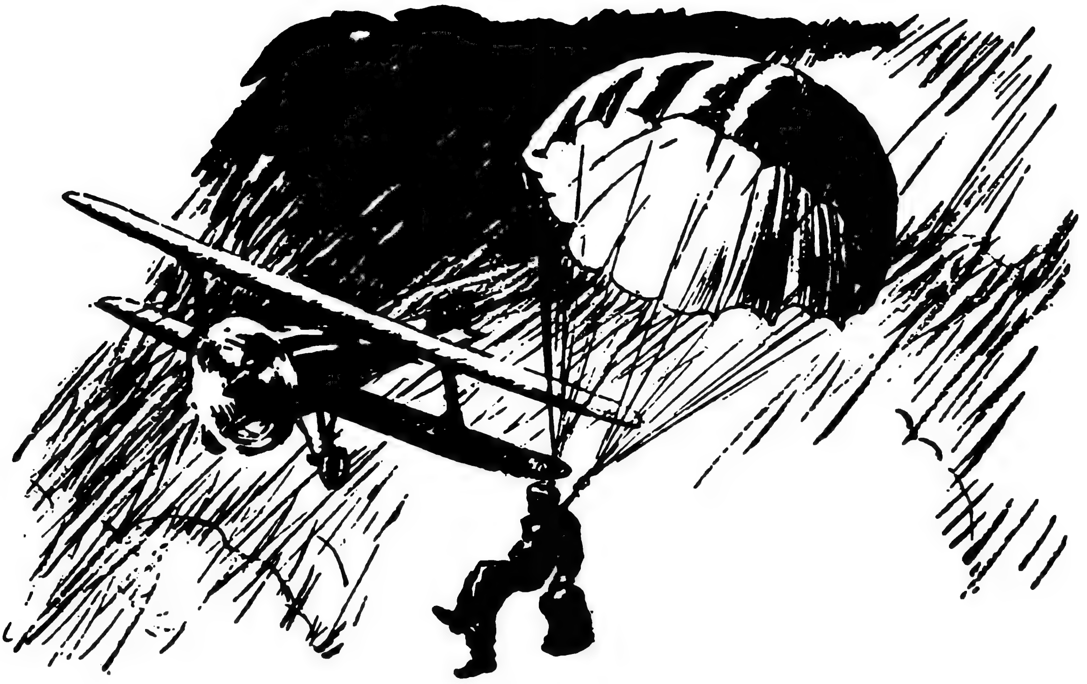
"I guess it took something like this to open my eyes, Jim," he said. "I'm through with the rough stuff. Mother always said you was two hours older than me, and it used to make me sore. I'll never be sore again, and you can tell me what to do, the same as you do the rest of the Black Kettle folks."

Old Black Kettle, shorn of its coat by the flames, stood stark and grim in the moonlight that night. There was a big roan horse standing at Gabe Roark's gate. Jim and Lorny were on the porch, talking low.

"I hope I don't live to see another day like this," said Gabe, wearily, as he removed his shoes in the house. "I'm tired, I'm sore, I'm almost dead, I want to go to bed, and I feel like I ought to pray, and thank God that it wasn't no worse than what it was."

"You're not going to bed, and leave Lorny sitting out there in the dark with——"

"Yes, thank God! I'd leave Lorny anywhere on earth with Jim Kelley, and know she was in the hands of a man."



SKY MONEY

A Tale of the Pirates of the Air

By RAOUL F. WHITFIELD

TWO weeks' pay for one hundred and twenty chinks and cholos, and some cash money for supplies that the Brettner people were sending in by truck from San Diego—it made just a little over ten thousand dollars in the small, rather flat mail pouch. They'd kill for a fiftieth of that sum, in Tia Juana and for a hundredth part of it, in Mexicali. Down in Ensenada, two nights ago, old Jim Harper had been crashed out for two bucks and some small change. The Mexican Imperial Valley wasn't exactly a healthy place for the human who packed coin. Too much mixed breed, bad blood. Too many renegades from across the line.

"Safe enough up here," Johnny Harmer muttered beneath the roar of the Liberty engine. "Safe—and pretty, too."

It was pretty. The sun was getting down into the Pacific, beyond the Cocopahs, beyond the fertile western watershed of the mountains. Johnny's red hair matched the color of the sunset already flaring in the sky. Below them, as they flew southward, was the sand and mesquite. The flood-road was off to the eastward; they were within twenty miles of the Harmer concession. Twenty miles. Fifteen minutes in the DeHaviland.

Johnny Harmer loved the concession land, the cotton it produced; but he loved it in a strange way. Born fighters, Johnny and his brother loved the land and the crops in a grim, scrapping manner. There was never a let-down, always trouble. Every revolution over eastward produced its drifting renegades who had lost out; the holders of the concessions along the seventy mile stretch were the sufferers from the raids. Now it was wise to fly the pay money in from San Diego. But even that method wasn't safe. Safe enough, but not sure-fire. Everything in the Valley was comparative. You never could tell.

The front cockpit of the D. H. was empty; Johnny was flying from the rear of the two-place ship. He had had a busy day, and he would be glad to get back to the ranch. But the sunset was pretty, and Johnny had something of an eye for beauty. It was because of this that he failed to see the plane that winged in from the eastward, until she was within a half mile of the D. H. Then she hove in sight.

She was a small ship, a single-seater. She came in on an angle, with altitude. Johnny banked the D. H. around, zoomed. There was no time for guess work. Staring off to the west, beyond the mountain range, he had lost his chance to maneuver. So he zoomed, with a finger of the hand that gripped the control pressing slightly against the stick-trigger of the prop-synchronized Browning.

The little ship banked off. The engine of the D. H. was pulling hard; in a few seconds she would have the plane in a stall. Johnny swore softly and leveled off. The single-seater was around back of his tail-assembly; he nosed the D. H. down a bit, got speed, then banked around sharply.

"Pretty, eh?" he snarled. "Damned fool for forgetting this country!"

He stopped muttering. A shape flashed down as he came out of the bank; he caught sight of the pilot's helmet in the little ship. The man had an arm out in the prop-wash; he was pointing toward the mesquite below.

Johnny Harmer smiled grimly. He had been a fool once in the past ten minutes, but he would not be one again. Not right away. Not that kind of a fool, anyway. But his keen eyes had seen the guns mounted just forward of the other pilot's cockpit, on the cowling. Two of them. And the little ship was fast, faster than the D. H. Easier to handle, of course.

He zoomed the D. H. again, headed her southward. Then he twisted his neck. It had fooled the other pilot, that maneuver. He had probably thought that Johnny would land right now. He had a half mile of air between the two planes. And the D. H. wide open. There might be a chance.

But there wasn't. Even with the plane in a mild dive. That little ship roared up on him from behind. Johnny swore through tight lips. As the single-seater got within fifty yards of the D. H., he banked suddenly and stiffly. But it didn't work. There was the sharp clatter, above the roar of the Liberty engine, of machine-gun fire. The D. H. jerked a bit, the controls went suddenly limp. No action on the rudder-bar; and the stick flopped from side to side. Lead had battered into the tail-assembly, had messed up the control wires!

Johnny shoved his goggles up on his forehead, snapped loose the buckle of his safety belt. His face was twisted with rage as he straightened up in the cockpit. He cut the ignition switch, reached down for the worn mail pouch. The nose of the DeHaviland was dropping. In about five seconds she would be in the first turns of a spin.

TWICE in his life Johnny Harmer had been over the side. He was cool enough in his actions, but there was a fury within him. Hooking the arm of the hand that gripped the leather mail pouch about a strut, he swung a leg over the fuselage, got a foot on the upper fabric of the lower wing surface. His left hand fumbled for the dangling rip-cord of his Irving seat-pack 'chute, found it.

The D. H. went into a slip. Johnny released his grip on the strut, ducked his head as he drifted out from the trailing edge of the wing-surface. He somersaulted down, tried to count five, then jerked the rip-cord ring. The pilot 'chute snapped out, jerking the greater spread of the big 'chute after it. The silk crackled, the risers came up. Harness tightened, cut burningly against his body.

Then he was drifting downward, getting gulps of the air, shaking the tears from his eyes. His right hand still gripped the leather handle of the worn mail pouch. He looked first toward the earth below.

There was no adobe house in sight. Nothing but mesquite, blue-gray in the light of the setting sun, and sand. The wind was drifting him toward the Cocopah mountains, what little there was of it. He had been flying at about eight thousand. There would be plenty of time before he struck the earth.

Off to the west the D. H. was falling in a tight spin. She was about level with Johnny now, but she would crash before he made his seventeen-foot a second drop. And it would be some crash.

Johnny jerked his head, kicked about in the harness. There was the scream of wind through flying wires, the roar of a jazzed exhaust. The roar died instantly. Banking around him as he drifted, less than twenty yards away, was the single-seater. The head of the pilot, helmeted and goggled, was suddenly stuck over the side of the fuselage. A voice sounded clearly above the shrill of wind through the little plane's rigging.

"Drop that bag!"

Johnny gritted words through his teeth. They were five thousand feet above the mesquite, at least. What would happen to the bag, the bills within, if he let it go? Would the other pilot lose track of it? Would the leather burst and the bills scatter?

The single-seater was around back of him; Johnny kicked, twisted as he dangled below the spread of silk. Ten thousand in cash! The pilot of the single-seater was wise. If Johnny dropped it he wouldn't hit the mesquite within a half mile of the spot where the bag would land. But the pilot of the little ship could get down close to it, pick it up, get into the sky again. There would be no chance of recognition, no chance of a slip-up.

The little ship dove down at Johnny. He got a flashing glimpse of the muzzles of the two guns. Then it sounded—the staccato *rat-tat-tat* of one of those guns. A thin red stream; then yellow, off to Johnny's left.

Tracer bullets, with the pilot purposely shooting wild. But the next time that ship came down nose-on that way . . .

"Drop it!"

The little plane banked in close. The pilot's voice was harsh above the wire-shrill. It was impossible to distinguish his features. He wore his helmet well down over his eyes; the goggle-glass covered them. And the lower portion of the helmet hid the rest of his face.

Four thousand feet! Johnny Harmer watched the ship swing out, flash around in a vertical bank. If his body were riddled with bullets, what difference would it make to the other pilot. He'd get the bag, one way or the other.

The nose of the little plane came down for the glide; he got a flashing glimpse of the two gun muzzles again. The 'chute was swaying from side to side as a lower current of air caught it. Johnny Harmer swore grimly—and dropped the mail pouch.

The single-seater dove instantly. And she stayed in the dive until Johnny Harmer wondered if her pilot could ever pull out of it without losing the wings. The ship was blotting out the brown, streaking-down shape of the mail pouch now. Johnny reached up for the shroud-ropes of the 'chute, found them and gripped hard.

There was a booming crash; the DeHaviland had struck earth. He twisted his head toward the west, saw a great ball of yellow-red fire over in the shadow of the Cocopahs. The 'chute was drifting into the shadow now; he pulled downward and inward on the shroud lines of the silk-spread, tried to slip the 'chute back against the wind.

He was down almost to two thousand feet. Off to the eastward he could see the single-seater; she had come out of her dive, was circling above the mesquite. Already the 'chute had drifted Johnny at least a quarter of a mile from the spot where the mail pouch must have struck. The country was level; unless the pilot of the little plane made a bad landing, tangled with mesquite that was thick and high, he would have no trouble in getting down.

Johnny Harmer groaned. A five thousand dollar plane, with equipment, and ten thousand in cash—both gone! And if he had not been admiring the sunset . . .

HE TOOK his eyes from the landing single-seater. Seventeen feet a second into mesquite, with even a slight drag, would be nasty business. The earth was striking up at him now. Clumps of mesquite were ahead; he was coming down right into them!

Savagely he jerked the shroud lines at one side of the 'chute. The spread of silk slanted to one side; the silk slipped him down clear of the thorny bush. He flexed his leg muscles, took the shock with his knees bent.

He landed hard, rolled over on his back. But he was up, and out from under the collapsing spread of silk. Desperately he worked at the harness, got free of it. He let the 'chute lay as it had collapsed, ran toward the distant and motionless single-seater, his .45 gripped tightly in his right hand. If the pilot of the single-seater was searching for the mail pouch . . .

Johnny Harmer ran, crouched forward. He was calm now, deadly calm. He was within a hundred yards of the little plane when he heard the exhausts roar. The pilot had climbed into the cockpit from the far side; the ship was rolling forward now.

Johnny ran forward. At fifty yards the ship was moving almost as fast as he was, but at an angle. Something glittered in the red light of the setting sun. Johnny halted, fired three times. Sand leaped up in a little spurt, less than five feet ahead of him.

Then the little ship was off the mesquite and sand, into the air, out of range. Her pilot zoomed her almost off the sand; straightened her out. He headed directly toward the border, but he climbed her steadily up toward a bank of gray clouds to the northward.

Johnny Harmer stood on the hot sand, and swore fiercely. There was no need of looking for the mail pouch. The pilot had it with him, riding the sky. Once up above in the clouds, he could get across the line without worrying much about a Border Patrol ship. And California was a big state.

The man on the ground jammed his .45 back into its holster. The drone of the single-seater's engine came to him in spurts, as the wind carried it back. He raised his eyes toward the little ship, then stiffened. In the sky to the northward, just under the gray bank of clouds, were two specks. They were moving. Every second they became larger. The specks were two ships, and they were winging southward!

Johnny stared at them. The drone from the exhausts of the single-seater died suddenly. The little ship was coming down, was banking around. One of the two other planes was diving, too. The other held her altitude. But the single-seater was winging southward now, heading back toward Ensenada. The pilot was taking no chances with the pilots of the two other planes. He was playing safe.

Off to the westward, about a half mile, the wreckage of the DeHaviland was burning. Johnny turned, stared at it. Then he started running toward it. The pilots of the two planes would see the black smoke rising up from the mesquite. If he could signal them in some way, he might get one of them to make a landing.

The money was still in the sky. The single-seater was heading southward, toward Ensenada. There would not be many places where the pilot of the hold-up ship could refuel. He might have gas and oil cached out somewhere, probably would have it hidden somewhere along the valley stretch. It was getting dark, but his exhaust trail would mark his air path. There was a chance yet. Not much of a one, but a chance. One took thin chances here.

Johnny's breath was coming in short spurts now. A half mile in the heat of the Valley, that was a run. He slowed down as he neared the wreckage of the D. H., stared for several seconds at it. Then, turning, he glanced up into the sky. His eyes widened, he muttered a hoarse exclamation.

The single-seater was gliding down toward the wrecked ship. The other two planes, a mile or so back, were gliding down, too. But it was the prop of the single-seater that interested Johnny. It whirled idly in the last rays of the setting sun. There was no jazzing of the single-seater's engine, no clearing out of gas through the exhausts every ten seconds or so, as the plane lost altitude. And the prop was not even turning at a throttled-down speed of six or seven hundred revolutions per minute.

Johnny got his Colt from its holster. He dropped down flat behind a two-foot mesquite growth. His lips moved slowly.

"Comin' in here!" he muttered. "And he's got a dead stick!"

IT WAS so. The single-seater was gliding down without power to roar herself away from the two planes that were gliding down after. At intervals Johnny could hear the staccato roar of the other two planes' exhausts, as the pilots gave their engine the gun. But the single-seater was just gliding. She leveled off fifty feet above the sand and mesquite, a quarter of a mile from the wreckage of the D. H., and headed directly toward the spot where Johnny was lying.

As she lost flying speed, sank nearer and nearer the earth, Johnny raised his Colt in his right hand, braced it with a left hand grip on his right wrist. The tail-skid and wheels of the single-seater struck sand, rolled forward. The plane was less than fifty yards from the D. H. wreckage now.

For a split second Johnny thought that the little ship would nose over. Her tail came up; her prop was almost scraping the sand and blue-gray bush. Then the tail dropped again; the plane rolled sluggishly forward a few more feet, stopped.

A figure swung down over the side. Johnny felt his body tense. The pilot of the little plane was tall, well built. In his right hand he gripped an automatic, in his left was the brown, worn mail pouch!

Johnny drew a deep breath. His eyes went to the other two ships. One was coming in for a landing, back of the little ship. She was a two-place plane, but he got a glimpse of only one man aboard her. The other ship was staying in the air, circling above them. She, also, was a two-seater. An old Standard, he thought. With a speedy engine.

He raised his gun slightly. The man beside the single-seater was half crouched; his eyes were on the wreckage of the De-Haviland. He had shoved his goggles up over the leather of his helmet. Johnny called out sharply.

"Drop that gun!"

There was a knife edge to his tone. Only a few minutes ago this man who stood beside the little plane had called out for him to drop something. Now the positions were reversed.

The pilot of the little plane stiffened. He turned slightly toward the sound of the voice. But he did not release his grip on the mail pouch. Johnny snapped out another command.

"Drop it—make it fast!"

Then it sounded. Sand jumped at his right elbow with the crack of the weapon in the pilot's grip. Johnny Harmer squeezed the trigger of his Colt. It cracked sharply. He saw the pilot sway.

But the other man's weapon spoke again. The Colt jerked from Johnny's right hand; a stabbing pain shot up through his arm. He got to his knees, tried to reach for the Colt with his left hand. The right was numb, useless.

"Steady!" The other pilot was walking toward him. He was not swaying now. And he held his automatic steady in his right hand. "Stand up!"

Johnny got to his feet. There was a thin line of red on his palm. The bullet from the other pilot's automatic had seared him, but had ricocheted from the metal of his Colt. It had been a lucky shot—for the other man.

Johnny stared at the pilot of the little plane. He had gray, steely eyes, and there was a hard expression within them. Without a word he tossed the brown mail pouch on the sand at Johnny's feet. It was growing dark rapidly now. There was the engine roar of a ship on the ground. One of the two-seaters had got down safely, and was being taxied slowly up toward the single-seater. The other still circled above.

"I'll do any talkin', see!" The man's voice was hard, icy. "One break, an' you get lead; an' plenty of it! Get that straight."

He held his gun on Johnny, walked to one side, ground the Colt into the sand with a heel of his shoes. His eyes only left Johnny's for the fraction of a second.

Johnny Harmer was thinking hard. Why had the single-seater come down with a dead engine. Out of fuel, or mechanical trouble? And why, above all things, had he come back to the wreckage of the D. H.?

"Nice 'chute jump you made!" There was grim amusement in the other's tone. He walked rapidly around behind Johnny, and as the figure of a third man slid over the side of the two-seater that had just taxied up, he raised his voice.

"Figured you'd get away with the coin, eh? Not quite, buddy!"

Johnny's eyes narrowed. So that was the game! The pilot of the little ship was trying to reverse the actual condition. Johnny was to be crook, caught with the goods. It lay at his feet, in the brown mail pouch.

He laughed hoarsely. His eyes were upon the face of the third man. The pilot of the two-seater was short, thick set. Johnny had never seen him before. He walked up slowly, no weapon in sight. There was a faint grin on his face.

"What's up, boys?" he asked.

JOHNNY'S lips parted. But they closed again as he felt the touch of steel against his back. The pilot of the single-seater chuckled hoarsely.

"Dropped down and stuck up my ranch twenty miles below here," he said grimly. "Got my pay-roll coin. Didn't figure I had this little single-seater, and when I pulled a chase he lost his nerve and got into a spin. Went over the side. There's the wreckage of his plane. Pretty lucky, he was; had to shoot the gun out of his hand, though. I'm Harmer."

Johnny's eyes were half closed. The man standing a few feet in front of him nodded his head slowly.

"Hell!" he muttered. "Gettin' airwis down here, eh?"

The pilot of the single-seater chuckled again.

"I'll say they are," he muttered. "Had me sort of scared to come down after him. Figured he might be layin' out for me, after his drop. Started to fly for Tia Juana and some help; then saw you an' your partner comin' along. Guessed you'd see the wreckage smoke. Then my engine went dead. Figured if I'd haye to come down I'd better come back an' try an' get this guy. Knew you'd be around to back me up. Got a break, too."

The third man nodded. Johnny Harmer could still feel the pressure of the gun muzzle against his back. Ten thousand dollars! The man who held the automatic would kill for that amount. If he made a move, if he started to talk . . .

The newcomer glanced up into the darkening sky. His partner was still circling about, at an altitude of around three thousand feet.

"What you going to do with him, Harmer?" he asked the man back of Johnny.

Johnny smiled grimly. He was commencing to see through the flying crook's game now. The fellow was a fast thinker. And he was getting the breaks. Bartlett, three concessions south of Johnny's, had a plane. The Cudahy people used one on their melon ranch. Yet these two flyers were strangers in the Valley. The crook's word was good.

"Figured if I could fix the engine trouble, and bum a bit of gas——"

Johnny straightened, started to speak. But the muzzle of the gun was pressed ghtly against his back.

"Sure, I can spare some gas." The ort, thick-set man nodded his head. "Me d my partner, we're flying down to Ennada to do some survey work for the ilroad. Got a rubber hose to drain some t with?"

The man who had taken Johnny's name lked around and handed the gun to the her pilot.

"Keep it on him," he advised. "He's tough one; plenty of nerve. I'll chuck e coin back in the plane and look for me hose."

The short, thick-set man nodded. He ld the gun low. It was almost dark. e pilot of the single-seater picked up the il pouch. He smiled mockingly at hnny.

"Sorry I can't take you with me, buddy!" he muttered. "I'm flying a little ship. Say," he turned toward the one who held the gun, "why not take him along to Ensenada with you? You got room. Turn him over to the Mex chief of police there. Tell him Johnny Harmer caught him trying to get away with the pay-roll. Not that the Mex will care about that any; they hate us white folks down here. But this guy's white, too. The Mex will take care of him, all right."

The other man frowned. The single-seater pilot spoke again.

"It's worth fifty to me to have you ride him down. Fifty bucks it is, if you'll turn him over for me. I'd do it if I had a two-place ship."

The short man nodded. "All right," he nodded. "I'll ride him down, for the fifty."

The single-seater pilot moved toward his plane. Johnny Harmer looked the man who held the gun squarely in the eyes.

"I'm Johnny Harmer!" he snapped. "He shot me down in my D. H., and I had to go over the side. Then he saw you fellows coming in, and had mechanical trouble right after it. He figured I'd tell you the truth and we'd nab him. So he came down and got in a lucky shot. He's got the coin in that mail pouch; don't let him get away with it."

"Good stuff!" The man with the gun smiled with his gray eyes. "When it comes to fairy tales you're there, man!"

Johnny swore softly. "I can tell you just how that money was made up for my payroll," he said grimly. "I can tell you the bank's name on the wrappers."

"Sure," the other agreed. "You had time to look the stuff over in the sky—before he caught up to you."

Johnny groaned. "There wasn't any catch-up," he stated in a low voice. "I'm Harmer. I was flying in from San Diego when he shot me down out of the sky. He can't tell you how that coin is done up. Everybody knows me in the Valley. Hold us both, that's all I ask. Get your friend to fly to any concession. They'll identify me."

Something in his tone seemed to cause the holder of the automatic to half believe in him. Johnny spoke rapidly, in a low tone.

"Swing that gun on him when he comes back. Let me ask him questions. He can't answer them. I'll give you proof. He's wrecked my D. H.; damn near finished me off. Don't let him get clear."

THE pilot of the two-seater stared at Johnny. Johnny's eyes went to the figure of the sky-bandit. He was working over the radial engine of his little ship. There was a flashlight in his hand.

"Listen," Johnny's voice was low. "He doesn't need gas. He's stalling for time. He's got a busted feed line, or his oil isn't pumping. He won't take gas from you. She didn't die that way, his engine. She just quit in a quick shut-off. That plane's got an emergency tank. Why doesn't he use that? Take that gun off me; let me prove——"

"Easy. Don't get movin' around."

The other man's voice was grim. Johnny had taken a step toward him, and he wasn't convinced. The engine of the ship in the sky suddenly died in tone; a shape was gliding down in the uncertain light that remained. The other pilot was coming in.

Johnny Harmer stood motionless. His lips moved, but he uttered no word. The flashlight was extinguished; the pilot of the single-seater came toward Johnny and the man who held the gun. Once he turned his head, glanced toward the ship that was gliding in. There was a grin on his face as he came up.

"See your friend got tired of bankin' around; he's comin' in," he stated cheerfully. "Got the break in the line fixed; taped her up. Won't need any gas; want to get back to the ranch right away. The boys'll be worried."

The pilot who held the gun nodded. The other man pulled a roll of bills from his pocket. They were new bills, crisp. Tens. Johnny stiffened. The money he had drawn from the bank! The chinks liked it new and crisp.

"Fifty!" The single-seater pilot's voice was hoarse. He handed the money to the one who held the automatic. "Got a gun? In the ship, eh? Well, keep that. Leave it with Juan Diaz, will you? He's the *polizo* guy. Just ask for Diaz, an' don't let this bird pull any funny stuff on the way down. I'll get into the air."

He turned away. Johnny's eyes were on those of the man who held the gun. He could hear the low whistle of the other ship's wires, as she came in.

"Don't let him go," he begged. "Hold him until—" His words were cut short.

The short, thick-set man whirled around. He called out sharply.

"Hey, Harmer. Wait a second."

The pilot of the single-seater halted, half turned. The one with the gun stepped up to Johnny. He slapped him sharply for the bulge of a weapon, then turned toward the sky-bandit. He held the automatic low; his left hand slipped under his short flying coat—a .38 snapped into sight.

Johnny saw the single-seater pilot's body stiffen. His right hand went down; there was a sharp crack!

The man beside Johnny took a step forward squeezed the trigger of one of his guns. It spat—and then he went down, pitched forward heavily. The single-seater pilot laughed harshly, his eyes on Johnny.

"Stay off, you!" he snapped. "Until I *get* off!"

He backed toward the ship. Johnny groaned. He tried to move his right hand, but could hardly lift it. The pilot who had been shot down groaned, tried to get to his knees.

"Stay down," Johnny muttered. "He's got us right."

But the kneeling man paid no attention to Johnny. He raised his left hand. The gun spoke three times in rapid succession.

From the cockpit of the D. H. there came a single crack, a tiny spurt of red. The kneeling man fell forward heavily, lay motionless. A voice cried out, from beyond the single-seater. There was the roar of the little ship's exhausts.

"Self-starter," Johnny muttered. "He'll get away."

The small ship was rolling forward. Johnny watched it pick up speed; then suddenly it swerved to the left. The left wing-tip came down low to the sand, ripped through a clump of mesquite.

"He'll crash!" Johnny cried out hoarsely. "What in hell is he doing with——"

Then he saw. Off to the right, taxiing straight at the single-seater, was the second Standard type plane.

And then, as the single-seater swerved more to the left—it happened. There was the sound of a bursting tire; the wing-tip crackled into the sand. In a flash the nose of the ship went down, the tail came up. The prop splintered. There was the boom-roar of crashed fabric as the plane went over and came down on her back.

Johnny got into action. With his left hand he got the .38 from the grip of the motionless man. Then he ran toward the nosed-over ship. There was the hiss of oil and gas on the hot exhausts. He was within fifty yards of her when the red flames started to streak up toward the sky. He noted that the exhaust roar of the two-seater had died; her pilot had cut the switch.

Then he saw the pilot of the single-seater. He was crawling out from under the burning ship. He got to his feet, staggered toward Johnny as he came up. There was red on his forehead, his face was twisted. His right arm hung loosely, but his left went toward his right hip.

Johnny Harmer called out sharply, saw the flash of metal in the light of the burning plane. And he saw something else, too—something that the single-seater pilot had dropped as he reached for his gun—the worn mail pouch. The sky money!

He struck savagely with the reversed butt of the .38. The pilot of the single-seater tried to block the blow, failed. It caught him just over the right temple. With a low groan he slipped to the sand. Johnny stared down at him, breathing heavily. He twisted the gun from his grip, moved toward the brown mail pouch. Pain stabbed up his right arm, but there was a faint smile playing about his lips. The sky money had come back home, back where it belonged.

"FIGURED something was wrong, after what I'd seen while I was circling around." Buck Allen smiled grimly. "Then I saw that bird shootin' from the front cockpit, as I taxied in. Saw the red spurts. *Knew* somethin' was up then. Figured I'd better force him to nose over. Only thing I could do."

Charlie Fawcett nodded his head. There were bandages on his head and shoulder.

"What do you do with that sky-bandit, Harmer?" he asked weakly. "Mexico is Mexico—and it ain't the U. S. A."

Johnny grinned. He raised a cigaret to his lips, with a bandaged right hand. They were in the living quarters of the adobe ranch house, and it was almost midnight. Pedro Demos, Johnny's ranch foreman, had come out looking for him, and had brought them all back in the car.

"His name's Cullen — Duke Cullen," Johnny said slowly. "He cleaned up in a gambling deal, and thought he saw something soft down here. So he went across the line and picked up that Laco special. Rigged up a couple of Brownings, and listened in on what a few chinks had to say, for a price. Then he played around and waited for me to come in. I'm giving him a break, boys. He signs over that single-seater, which won't cost much to fix up. And she's fast. I fly him up to Calexico, and turn him loose. He's getting off lucky.

"If he hadn't busted a feed line, and let us scare him, he'd have been luckier," Buck Allen muttered. "And you get that fast baby, eh?"

Johnny smiled grimly. "I do, and it's a nice deal," he said slowly. "That was a pretty sunset, a right pretty one. I'm still flying my pay-roll coin in. And there'll be other sunsets, and other sky-crooks. With that little ship they won't catch me napping."

"Down here," Charlie Fawcett observed, "it don't pay to nap—not when you got money along. Big money."

"It sure doesn't," Johnny Harmer agreed in a grim voice. "Not even when it's sky money!"

Concluding

A Fascinating Story of Murder and Suspense on a Great Western Ranch

The Desert Moon MYSTERY

By

KAY CLEAVER STRAHAN

Preceding Events Briefly Retold

The Desert Moon Ranch, Nevada, is the scene of a mysterious murder. On the ranch at the time is a curious collection of individuals. Each has an important bearing on the story and so we shall list them as follows:

Mary Magin, the middle-aged housekeeper who tells the story.

Sam Stanley, the wealthy owner of the ranch, a mild and lovable giant of a man.

John, his adopted son, an upstanding young man of twenty-five.

Martha, the adopted daughter, twenty-one years old, physically well and attractive but with the mentality of a child of five.

Mrs. Ricker, who came to the ranch to take care of John and Martha. A strange and silent woman.

Robert Hand, who came to the ranch years ago to recover his health and has stayed ever since.

Chadwick Caufield, a born musician, a ventriloquist and so entertaining Sam Stanley won't let him leave the ranch.

The Canneziano twins, Danielle (Danny) and Gabrielle (Gaby) who are alike in face and figure but are entirely different in manners, dress and disposition. Danny is sweet, quiet, well bred. Gaby is loud, racy and has a bad temper.

In the past, Margarita, Sam's wife, ran away with an Italian puncher, Canneziano. Sam got a divorce, and Canneziano and Sam's divorced wife were married. The twins were the fruit of this marriage, and after their mother's death, Sam, although he despised their father, helped the twins financially and otherwise.

At the opening of the story, the girls, now twenty-four, have arrived from Europe for their first visit to the ranch since they were eight years old.

Danny and John are much attached to each other and in two weeks are engaged.

Gaby flirts with John but cannot lure him from Danny. John dislikes Gaby as do all the others except Chad and Hand.

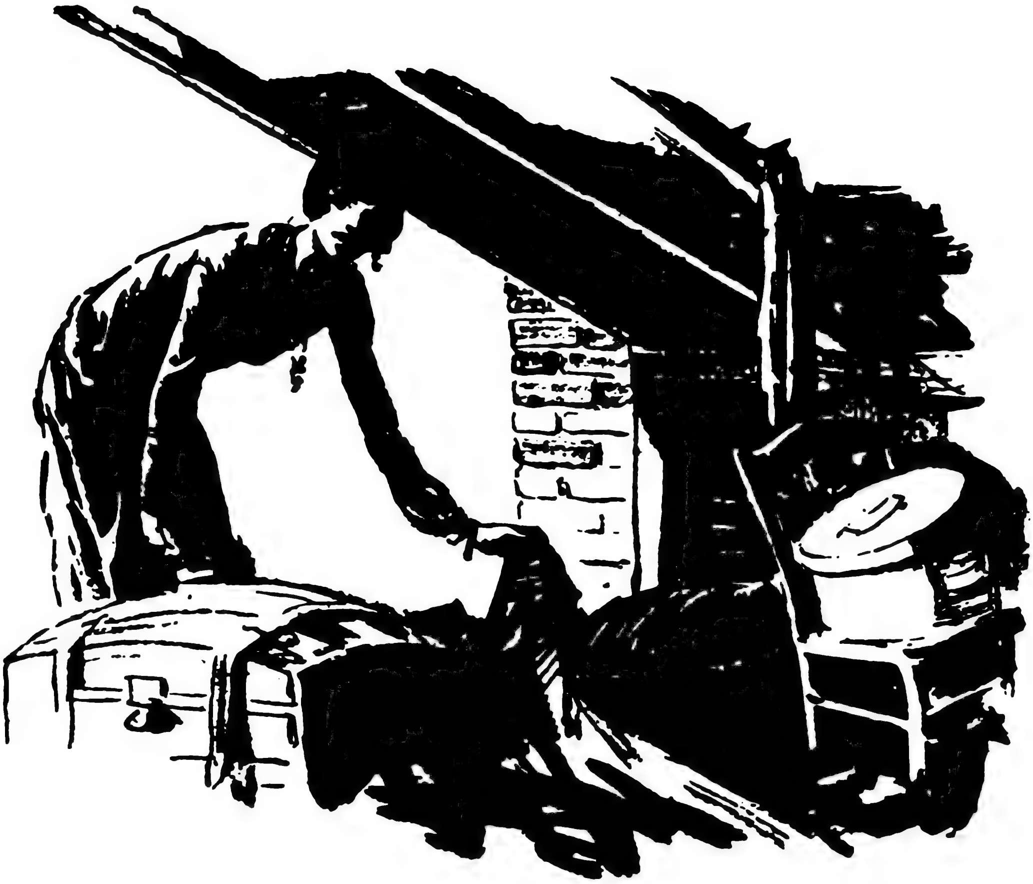
Hand makes idle love to Gaby, and she reciprocates in kind. Chad is hopelessly in love with Gaby but she pays no attention to him. Martha dislikes Gaby with a violent, childish aversion.

During the twins' two-months' stay at the ranch, Mary has overheard them talking, and learns that they are hunting for something on the Desert Moon—something connected with revenge. She also overhears Mrs. Ricker tell Hand that she would like to kill Gaby. John himself has told Mary that he would like to strangle Gaby for making Danny unhappy.

On the afternoon of July fourth, when all the help have left the ranch to attend a rodeo, Gaby comes downstairs and goes out, presumably for a walk. Shortly after, Danny calls and learns that Gaby has left and comes down to the living-room herself. The entire household is present in the living-room except: John, who has gone to Rattail for the mail, Martha, who is out feeding the rabbits, and Gaby, who has just left for a walk.

Martha soon comes in, exhibiting a gold bracelet which she says Gaby has just given her. Martha has always coveted this bracelet.

All remain in the house a couple of hours.



Then Mary starts supper. Danny sets the table. Mrs. Ricker remains in the living-room and Martha goes to sleep there on the sofa. Sam, Chad and Hand go out to the barn to milk the cows.

Then all sit down to supper wondering where Gaby is and why John hasn't returned from town.

As they are finishing supper John drives in, going around to the back door. He insists on going upstairs to clean before eating. He remains upstairs quite a while, and when he comes down he refuses any food, saying it is too hot to eat.

By this time all are worried about Gaby. Everyone except Mrs. Ricker and Martha goes looking for her. After searching for an hour they are forced back to the ranch by a heavy shower. While they are closing windows and doors Mary, the methodical housekeeper, remembers that the attic windows are wide open. She sends Chad up to close them.

Chad goes upstairs and shouts back that the attic door is locked. Mary goes up to see and finds that Chad's report is true. Chad goes downstairs to get a key.

Mary, standing there waiting, puts a hand into her pocket and discovers a key. It fits the attic door and she opens it.

About half way up the stairs is Gaby, lying in a huddle. Mary tries to scream but cannot. Then on the carpet she sees something that shocks her. Dropped all over the beaded bag, lying there, are ashes from Sam's pipe. Horror-struck she sweeps the ashes up and puts them into her pocket. Just then Chad returns.

"Call the others," Mary cries, "Gaby is here—murdered!" Then she faints.

While the others are reviving Mary, Chad goes out of the house and shoots himself. He leaves a note confessing to Gaby's murder.

All would like to believe Chad's confession but Sam will not accept it as true because he was with Chad all afternoon.

The coroner arrives and his inquest yields only the formal verdict of "killed by person or persons unknown." It is thought that Gaby had been dead for two or three hours before her body was discovered.

The clues are many, confusing, and point in turn to everyone in the household.

A brief note is found in Gaby's pocket saying that she expected to be murdered. It also requests Danny to take her body to San Francisco to be cremated. Danny shows Mary a code letter which Gaby had received from Europe two days before her death. But Mary can make nothing of it. Then there is the key Mary found in her pocket. It is not the key to the attic but an old passkey.

Hand says he suspects John because John alone is unable to account for every minute of his time on the afternoon of the murder.

Then John tells the story of the twins before they came to the ranch. Gaby had been an actress in Europe, but only to cloak her operations with a blackmailing gang. The chief of this gang, Lewis Bauermont, was Gaby's lover. One night he showed the twins a letter he had received from their father, Daniel Canneziano, who was then serving a prison term. Bauermont made a story out of this letter. He said that he and Canneziano had robbed a train three years before and had hidden the loot on the Desert Moon. Danny believed him and in order to get Gaby away from the bad crowd she was traveling with her, in Europe, she persuaded her sister to come to the Desert Moon to look for the buried money. The code letter Gaby had received on July second was from this Bauermont.

Then, as the case becomes more complicated than ever with new suspicions, Mrs. Ricker discovers that Martha, who was thought to be sleeping on the sofa, is dead! Sam breaks down and believes that he has killed Martha by forcing her to take a very strong sleeping powder. Mrs. Ricker, heartbroken, discloses the fact that she and Hand are Martha's parents. The two had met years before in San Francisco, just after Hand, then a young man, had ended a prison term for forgery.

Mrs. Ricker has something else to confess. She says she believes that Martha has been her instrument in killing Gaby, whom she hated. With the seed of this hatred in her heart Martha probably had overpowered Gaby at the rabbit hut. Chad had left the barn, found her there, and then had carried Gaby's body up the back way to the attic, scattering ashes from Sam's pipe upon the bag next to the body in order to clear Martha, a mental child, of the guilt. Some of the household wish to believe this story; others deny its truth vigorously.

Shortly after, Danny leaves for San Francisco with Gaby's body.

While confusion is spreading through the household Sam receives a telegram from Lynn MacDonald, a San Francisco crime specialist of repute, offering her services on the case. Sam wires her to come on.

The doorbell rings. It is Daniel Canneziano! He has come to pay a long visit. Sam recovers from his amazement and asks Canneziano about Bauermont and the train robbery. The puncher replies that he knows Bauermont but that they had never pulled the robbery.

On the same train that brings Danny home comes Miss MacDonald. She is a personable young woman, charming yet businesslike. When Danny hears that her father, Daniel Canneziano, is at the ranch she is horror-struck. Their meeting is perfunctory, in the presence of the household.

Miss MacDonald takes charge and learns the history of the case. She asks to see the box of sleeping powders, one of which Martha had taken before her death. The box is gone! Miss MacDonald discounts Mrs. Ricker's opinion. From the evidence, Gaby was killed by someone coming down the stairs behind her. The fingers of her right hand were fastened on the stair tread with the clutch of death.

Miss MacDonald finds the missing key to the attic door buried in the ashes of the fireplace. Whose work that? John appears to be much attracted by Miss MacDonald.

Daniel Canneziano tells Mary that he wants to make a dicker with her. Curiosity impels her. He says that if Mary will persuade Sam to give him the ten thousand for producing the murderer he will split with Mary. Just then Danny steps from behind the window curtains. She warns Mary to have nothing to do with her father, a proven criminal. That ends the possibility of a dicker.

Miss MacDonald asks Mary to help her with the case. Mary agrees to do so. Her first assignment is to keep an eye on Danny.

A most fortunate thing happens. Someone steals the code letter from Miss MacDonald's desk. It was left there as bait and the detective has a copy of it.

Suddenly Miss MacDonald tells Mary that she has made a great mistake in her attempts to solve the murder. She had been assuming that Gaby's letter to Danny was in Gaby's hand. She asks Mary to secure a copy of Gaby's handwriting from Danny. Danny says she has no evidence. Miss MacDonald sits down to work out the code letter Gaby had received before her death.

CHAPTER XLIX

NEW SUSPICIONS

I FOUND him in the living-room, playing solitaire. Mrs. Ricker was in the chair by the window, tatting. She seemed to be thinking hard about something.

"Lands, Sam," I said, sitting down across the table from him, "when did you take to sitting around and wasting good time like this?"

"I am helping Miss MacDonald," he said. "Making it easy for her to watch me and convincing her that I'm more or less of a nut, at the same time. Two birds with one stone—"

"She isn't watching you," Mrs. Ricker spoke up. "She is watching Hubert and me."

Queer that with all the years I had known Mrs. Ricker as a dumb person, now that she had begun to talk, her talking seemed only natural.

"I reckon," Sam said, "that she is watching all of us pretty closely."

"No," Mrs. Ricker insisted, "she is watching Hubert and me. Chiefly me. I can't stand it much longer. I am losing my mind. If I don't leave here, before long, I shall be quite insane."

I can't say that Sam's ears actually pricked up when she said that, but they gave that impression.

"I didn't know that you were thinking about leaving here, Mrs. Ricker," he said.

"I am thinking about it; because, if I don't leave here, soon, I shall have to be taken—to an insane asylum."

"Now, now, Mrs. Ricker," Sam urged,

"don't be feeling like that. It is just a case of watch and let watch around here, now—"

"It certainly is not a case of live and let live," she said. "I tell you, I can't stand it!" She jumped up from her chair, and went rushing out of the room through the front door. On the porch she dropped into a chair, and hid her face in her hands.

As I looked at her, sitting there, I remembered that it was she who had found the body. Her story had sounded straight enough; but, before she had told it, she had had plenty of time to make it a straight one. Perhaps she had had help in making it a straight one.

Hubert Hand. He had, by his own admission, served a term in prison for forgery. He had had notes from Gaby, and had destroyed them. Was it possible that he might have written the farewell note to Danny, and the inscription on the photograph? Sam could not swear that Hubert Hand had been in the barn the entire hour between five and six o'clock. That meant, then, that no one knew, positively, where he had been between five and six o'clock. I remembered how eager he had been, at first, to prove that John was the guilty person; how readily he had accepted the theory of Martha's guilt. That theory had been Mrs. Ricker's. Mrs. Ricker loved Hubert Hand. She had loved Martha, too; but Martha was dead.

Would it have been possible for Hubert Hand to have slipped into the house, through the front door, during that hour between five and six, without Danny's having seen him? Possible—that was all. Danny had cut the bread, in the kitchen. She had emptied jelly from its glass to a dish; had cut the butter. Each task a matter of minutes; but coming through the front door and getting upstairs would be a matter of minutes, also. Mrs. Ricker, of course, would have seen Hubert Hand pass through the room; but Mrs. Ricker could keep a secret.

Again, what had he thought that I had overheard that day in the cabin?

What motive could he have had for killing Gaby? Suppose that Gaby had lied to Danny about the entire contents of the code letter, and that, after all, the money had been hidden on the place. That would be an explanation for Canneziano's coming to the ranch. But suppose that Hubert Hand had found it, or had known that Gaby had found it—

"Come home, Mary," Sam's voice, speaking extra low, cut in on my reverie. "I want to know what you think about this.

"I set Canneziano to mending the south clover fence this morning. I told him I was going to the north clover. On my way there, I passed the house. I happened to remember how slick Miss MacDonald had cleaned the attic. It seemed a shame not to use it; so I went up, taking my field glasses with me, for luck. I'd watched about five minutes, out of the window, when I saw Canneziano leave the fence and make up toward the cabin. I came down, jumped on Bobbie Burns, and circled around the hill, back of the cabin. Just as I got my glasses trained, I saw Danny, walking to beat time, coming away from the cabin. I don't know whether she had been in it or not. I didn't see her come out of it. I rode straight down. Before I had quite reached the cabin, Canneziano came out of it. He was carrying a fishing rod, and he went right down to the stream with it. What I'm wondering is, had he and Danny met at the cabin, and had a talk?"

"I know exactly what Mrs. Ricker means," I said, "about losing her mind on this place. It has come to the pass that no one can do any simple thing without being spyed on and suspicioned. Danny always takes her walks in the direction of the cabin. We all do. It is the prettiest, coolest walk on the place."

"Does she always walk so fast, trying to keep cool?"

"Probably not," I said, "unless she has seen Canneziano, and is walking fast, trying to get away from him."

Sam rubbed the back of his head. "By Joe! I hadn't thought of that."

"Think about it now, for a minute," I advised. "When you get through, try to think whether you know of any place where we could get hold of a scrap or two of Gaby's handwriting. We have the last note she wrote to Danny, but we want something more."

"You've come to the right place, for once," he said, and took a long envelope out of his pocket.

"I guess I never happened to mention

to you, did I, that I fixed up a small checking account for the girls in the Telko Bank? It was just a matter of my own convenience—saved me the pesky trouble of buying money orders at the post office. Their bank statements and canceled checks came in a few days ago. I was going to look them over, soon as I could get around to it. Here they are. Do you want me to take them up to Miss MacDonald?"

"I'll take them," I offered, "and save you the trip." I longed to see how much of Sam's money the girls had spent in one month, and what they had spent it for.

I don't know yet whether it was cunning, contrariness, or courtesy that propelled Sam up those stairs, with the envelope tight in his hand, and without having allowed me as much as a peek at its contents.

CHAPTER L

SHOVELS

I WENT into the kitchen and put through a fairly good batch of baking, considering that I'd got a late start at it. I had intended only to stir up a sunshine cake for supper; but when a thunder shower came, washing everything cool and sweet, I opened the kitchen wide to it, and made an angel cake out of the whites of the eggs, and baked a big pan of ginger bread. Zinnia did the washing up; so I was all through and frosting the cakes, when Miss MacDonald telephoned down to the kitchen and asked me to go for a walk with her.

Between times, I'd roasted three chickens and got a salad in the icebox. I wouldn't need to turn a hand to supper for an hour; so I told her that I'd like nothing better than a breath of the clean, sage-seasoned air, and that I'd be ready in ten minutes. I gave Zinnia a few directions, and went upstairs to change my shoes.

As I came down the front stairs, into the living-room, I saw Mrs. Ricker coming up the steps to the porch. She was toting a big old shovel; carrying it out in front of her, and carefully, right side up, like it was a pancake turner and she had a pancake on it. I stopped in my tracks. There are some connections that the mind refuses: President Coolidge with a six-gun, for instance, or Chief Justice Taft with a saxophone, or Mrs. Ricker with a heavy, dirty old shovel.

She stopped to turn sidewise and open the screen door with her foot, and then she came straight along into the living-room, poking the thing toward Miss MacDonald.

"I want you to look at this," she said.

Miss MacDonald, all crisp in white linen, backed away a mite; but she looked, as directed.

I came hurrying to look too. I don't know what I expected to see—nothing less than a dead scorpion; but, certainly, something more than I did see: an old iron shovel with earth on it.

"Well?" Miss MacDonald questioned.

"I was going to Martha's grave when the shower came up. I stopped in the cabin. This shovel, and another one, were inside the door there. Look at that earth—it is fresh earth. Now I tell you, two people have been digging around this place; and they were at it not longer ago than yesterday, more likely this morning."

"My word!" said Miss MacDonald. It seemed to me there was more annoyance in her voice than there was interest or astonishment.

"Somebody," I pronounced, "still believes that there is money hidden around here."

Mrs. Ricker nodded her satisfaction.

"But surely," Miss MacDonald said, "around a farm, a ranch, that is, around a place of this sort there must be a great deal of digging going on. Gardens, vegetables, you know. That is—one thing and another." She fumbled it, like that.

"We don't make gardens here in July," I told her. "The vegetable gardens and greenhouses are about three miles away from where Mrs. Ricker found the shovels."

"To be sure." She puckered her brows. "But Mr. Stanley spoke of fishing. Don't the men dig worms for bait?"

"Anyone," I told her, "who did bait fishing on the Desert Moon, would be about as popular as an S. P. C. A. convention at a round-up. Likely you'll learn our ways, in time. Bait fishing isn't one of them."

While I had been getting this off my mind, Danny had come downstairs. I guess we must have looked funny, the three of us, standing there and staring at the shovel, which Mrs. Ricker was still holding as if it were a pancake turner.

"But—what is it?" Danny inquired.

"It is a shovel," said Mrs. Ricker.

"Yes, I know. But what about it?"

"It has fresh earth on it," Mrs. Ricker explained. "It means that someone is still hunting for something on this ranch."

"I—don't understand," Danny faltered.

"You do, if anyone does," Mrs. Ricker said, trying to make it sound off-handish; but it did not.

To my surprize, Miss MacDonald answered, "I think that you are mistaken, Mrs. Ricker. Miss Canneziano knows, I fancy, no more about the shovel than you do."

Mrs. Ricker's face flushed. She carried the thing out and threw it into the yard with a gesture of furious anger. When Miss MacDonald and I passed her on the porch, she turned her head away and did not look at us.

"If we'll hurry," I said, "we'll have time to walk to the cabin and see the other shovel."

"Bother the other shovel! We don't want to hurry. Can't we get down to the stream, somewhere close here, and find a place where we can be alone to talk?"

"Right down this path," I answered, and started down it. She followed me. For fifty yards or more neither of us said a word. I was too put about to feel like talking.

Why should she have told me to "bother the shovel"? Why had she acted so peculiarly about the shovels, anyway; choosing to assume that they were unimportant? If, as I supposed she was thinking, Mrs. Ricker had gone to the trouble to fix up those two shovels, and to carry one of them in, to hoodwink us, that was important. I was sure in my own mind that Ollie Ricker had not done that. If she had not, and if two people were digging around the place, they were digging for something, weren't they? For what? For exactly what I had said—for money. Worms!

I must have made a sound that was suggestive of my disgusted annoyance, for Miss MacDonald stepped up to walk beside me on the narrow path.

"I am sorry," she said, "that I have seemed so exasperatingly stupid; but I know that those shovels are of no importance."

"I don't see how you could know that," I said.

"I am sorry again; but I have promised not to tell you how I know it."

"Not to tell me!"

"I meant, of course, that I had promised not to tell anyone. My promise was made to Mr. Stanley. Since this has come up, I am sure that he will allow me to break it and tell you what it is that I can't tell you now."

"Sam!" I said. I was mad all over. I had thought that, anyway, Sam was open and above board with me.

"You'll understand all about it, later," she said. "Please don't be vexed. I have some really good news. First, the handwriting on the checks, the photograph, and the note all tally accurately. That must mean, that Gabrielle Cannezianno wrote all of them. Next, I have worked out the key to the code letter—"

"Lands alive!" I said, my astonishment and admiration getting the best of my bad humor. "In this short time? Talk about wonders—"

"Not a bit of it. The code is so simple that I am surprized that people, who have wits enough to use a code at all, would use it.

"The keys on typewriters, with a standard keyboard are arranged, you know, for the touch system of writing: a, s, d, f, g; so on. All that this code amounts to, is taking the letters straight as they come along; a, b, c, d; and on on. From the center line of letters, they skip to the upper line, making the 'q' be a 'j,' and from the upper line down to the lower line, making the 'z' a 't.' They use only the letters on the keyboard, and the punctuation marks as they would rightly be used. Generally they put a hyphen after the letter to be capitalized, though occasionally they use the capital letter. It is so childish that I fancy it is only a friendship code, and that it is not used for matters of any real importance."

"Then this letter is of no importance?" I asked.

"Not to the writer. Of vast importance to us, I believe. It explains why the original letter was stolen, among other things. Here is one of the copies that I made of it."

CHAPTER LI

DANIELLE'S SECRET

WE HAD come to the stream, and to the shade of the aspen trees. I sat down on one of the rocks, above the first fishing hole, and unfolded the papers she had given to me, and read:

Salutations! Do you remember, my dear and gay Gaby, after the V. affair, when you visited me in the hospital, that you said, with your imitated Mona Lisa smile, "Sorry, old dear, I made a trifling mistake, did I not?" The incident has probably passed from your memory. It has not passed from mine, because I did not believe then, and I do not believe now, that you intended to fire that shot at V. instead of at me. You proved your innocence, however, like the expert you are; so, "let the dead past—" et cetera. Particularly since I did not die, but have lived to make, also, a trifling mistake.

I find that I was in error concerning the train robbery. After due reflection, I have remembered that, reading of the details in the Denver papers, your respected father and I merely regretted that we had not had the forethought, and the cleverness, to have pulled the affair ourselves. Since this is the case, we could not have hidden the money, as I seem to recall telling you that we did, on the Desert Moon Ranch. It was a pretty dream of ours—that was all.

Shall I explain? Do you remember the sweet cocotte with the colored sash at Cannes? Very young, very exquisite, and almost very innocent? She watched us, from her table, out of the violet corners of her long, long eyes. When we left the place, you and I, my gloves were missing and I returned for them. You were duped, my dear, were you not?

She is not as lovely, not as gay as you were at eighteen. But you are no longer eighteen. And you have grown exacting, and a bit vicious (recalling, again, the V. affair), and a bit selfish, too. (I knew that you collected the final five hundred pounds from Baron T.)

These, and all things, considered I seem to myself to have acted rather nobly, rather compassionately. I spared you the heartache of witnessing your supplantation. Ours was a tender leave taking, was it not? I paid the expenses of a long and costly journey for you and the gentle Danielle. (Gad, Gaby, I'd have paid twice as much to be rid of you for half the time!) I sent you to fond relatives. I provided you with an interesting and romantic occupation, treasure hunting. I gave the righteous Danielle the opportunity for which she was pining; the opportunity to try her hand at turning you into an honest woman.

Tell her, by the way, that her lover, or as she virtuously insisted, her husband is still with me, and that he is behaving himself admirably. I suspect that my Lili is a bit over fond of him; but I have warned her that one who has had the chaste affections of the little nun would be unlikely to succumb to her ardencies.

Lili now inquires to whom am I writing. She is eighteen; she has seen you; so I dare tell her, to you, in a far country with an amusing name, Nevada.

She mispronounces it, deliciously. She blows it, and you, charmingly away from the tips of her tiny pink fingers. She kisses my ears. She tells me that she owns me. So, I suppose, I should not sign myself, as of old, "Yours," with an ever increasing devotion, Bimbi.

"Good lands alive!" I said. My stomach hurt me, and my head ached.

"I am sorry for young Mr. Stanley," Miss MacDonald said. "But, you see, I was right in thinking that Miss Cannezianno's life might hold a secret."

"No! No!" Danny stood there in front of us, holding on to an aspen tree for support.

"I wondered whether you were coming out from behind the tree," Miss MacDonald said.

"I saw you looking at me. You are cruel. You are very cruel."

For a minute all I could be was sorry for Danny. I got up and went to her and put an arm around her.

She tucked her head down on my breast. She was so small that I could look right over it, at Miss MacDonald, sitting there, undisturbed and triumphant. She was in the right; and was a good girl; so it was queer that the sight of her made my heart go straight out to the wrong, bad, little Danny, with her brown head underneath my chin.

"Danny, honey," I said, "are you planning a divorce, after you've had your six months in Nevada? Was he cruel to you? Unfaithful?"

"No, no," she said. "Nothing like that, nothing at all. I can explain every word of it. But will anyone believe me?"

"You just try it," I urged. "I'm all set for believing you, right here and now. Come over here, and rest, and tell us all about it."

I led her across to the rock where I had been sitting, and made a place for her beside me.

CHAPTER LII

AN EXPLANATION

SHE began right straight forward and sensible. "I knew that that was in the letter, and I longed to destroy it, on that account, but I was afraid. I knew that its disappearance would throw all sorts of suspicions on me. But this morning, when I saw the thing, right there on her desk, the temptation was too great. I never thought of her having made a copy of it. This afternoon, when I heard her at the typewriter—I knew. I've been in torment ever since. I have prayed and prayed that she might fail to work out the code. When I came downstairs, just now, I knew that she had not failed. I thought that she would tell you about it; so I followed. I thought, perhaps, if I'd tell you both the truth, and plead with you to believe me— But now I am ashamed to offer it.

"You won't believe me. John won't believe me. But, it was only a doll: one of those funny, long-legged, floppy things, with an adorable face. I saw him in Paris, and loved him, and bought him for mine. I called him Christopher Clover, and said that he was my husband—because I had always said that I would never marry. Lewis—he was so horrid about everything—used to tease me about my lover, until I got so tired of it, and so ashamed, that I put him away on a closet shelf.

"After we were all packed, and the trunks were locked, that last day, I found him there on the shelf. Gaby wanted me to carry him on my arm—that was done quite a bit over there. She thought it was *chic;* but I thought it looked silly. I was going to leave him in the apartment; but Lewis asked me to let him have him. I did. That is all. But—will you let me see the copy of the letter? Gaby read it to me only once."

I gave it to her.

"See," she said, eagerly, "he calls me righteous. See how he speaks of the doll and his—Lili. He wouldn't have spoken like that about a man, nor said that he was behaving himself. See, too, he calls me a nun. If you'll be fair—it seems to me you can easily believe me."

"Honey child," I said, and spoke the truth. "I do believe you. It is sensible and reasonable. I believe every word you've told us."

"And you?" she appealed to Miss MacDonald.

"Your explanation is reasonable. You have told the truth about everything else in the letter. Certainly, I shall give you the benefit of the doubt."

"You won't tell John?" Danny pleaded.

"Of course not. Nor anyone else, just now. Shall we go back to the house?"

Danny and I sat still.

"I'll run along, then," she said, and went away without us.

"Danny," I began at once, "you take my advice. You get to John as quickly as you can and tell him the truth about this. He loves you. He'll want to believe you. Men always believe whatever they want to believe. Don't you worry another mite about it."

"Have you noticed," she questioned, slowly, "that John has been different—very different, ever since—"

"We've all been different, dear," I told her.

"Yes, I know. But—John has been more different. Mary, tell me, am I silly? Have you noticed that John seems to be very much interested in this Miss MacDonald? He looks at her, all the time. And he jumps about, waiting on her, rather as Chad used to do with Gaby. Of course, he feels that I have changed, too. And I have. I can't keep from showing how unhappy I am, and how worried. I suppose I constantly dissappoint him. And yet—"

"Danny," I said, "it is just this. Men don't wear well in times of trouble. They can't help it. It is the way they are mixed. So we women put up with it. We have to, if we put up with men at all. Everything is going to come out all right. But I want you to tell John, yourself, about your doll, and not wait for someone else to do it."

"I'll try to," she agreed. "But we are so rarely alone together, any more."

On our way back to the house, Sam and John overtook us. I got Sam to walk along fast with me, and left them lagging behind us.

"I'm a mite worried," Sam said, "about those two young folks. I don't quite make them out, here lately. I suggested to John, a while ago, that considering Danny's trouble, and all, it might be just as well for them to have an early wedding. Told him to talk it over with Danny, and that any date they set would be all right with me.

"I was all braced against being carried off and drowned in a torrent of gratitude. No siree. That young whelp evaded it. Said that he'd see, and that she'd see, and that right after so much trouble might not be a suitable time for a wedding. I'd give a pretty to know what he has on his mind. I can't think that the boy is just rotten fickle. And yet—he has been shining up to Miss MacDonald, here of late. Have you noticed it, Mary?"

"Noticed, nothing!" was the best that I could do.

CHAPTER LIII

ANOTHER MURDER

CANNEZIANO did not come down for breakfast the following morning. I thought that it was a little strange, for meals were the one thing he had been real polite to ever since he had been on the Desert Moon.

As soon as breakfast was over, Miss MacDonald spoke to Sam and asked him, as she had asked him that first morning if she might detain him. "You, also, Mrs. Magin," she smiled at me.

"I wonder," she said, as soon as we three were alone together, "if Mr. Canneziano could have given us the slip, last night?"

"Not likely, with ten of the boys all drawing wages for watching the place, and him in particular, is it?" Sam questioned.

"Not at all likely. Still—will you go and see whether or not he is in his room, now, Mr. Stanley?"

Sam went. When he came back he had to drawl a lot more than usual to keep his voice steady. "His door is locked. He doesn't answer when I pound on it."

Miss MacDonald said, "I have an excellent passkey. Let's go up and try it."

Curiosity dragged me along with her and Sam, though every bone in my body protested.

Miss MacDonald's key unlocked the door. The three of us went into the room.

The blinds were tightly drawn. The electric fan was whirring and buzzing away in the gray gloom.

Miss MacDonald crossed the room, quickly, and snapped up the blinds. There was one long, hard, dusty shaft of yellow sunlight. Sam walked through it to the bed where Canneziano was lying, huddled up under the covers. I looked the other way.

I heard the rattle of Sam's pipe as it fell on the floor. I heard the rustle of Miss MacDonald's quick movement. I heard a queer, throaty note that she uttered. Something dragged my hot, aching eyes open. I looked toward the bed. I saw Canneziano's swollen, discolored face. I saw the deep yellow throat, with great brutal bruises at its base. The shaft of sunlight moved up and down, up and down, carving through the swaying blackness like a long sharp knife.

I felt Sam's strong hands on my shoulders, pressing me down into a chair. I heard myself saying, shrilly, over and over, "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

It was Miss MacDonald's voice, cold and clear as spring water that brought me to my senses. "We are going to find the murderer on the Desert Moon Ranch."

Sam said, "You're damn right we are. And we are going to have half a dozen he-men detectives on this place by to-morrow night."

"Very well," Miss MacDonald answered. "Will you telephone, at once, for the coroner, Mr. Stanley?"

"Hell!" Sam said.

I had my face covered; but there was a hollowness in that oath of Sam's that told me, plainer than any looking at him could have told me, that he was frightened; scared to the marrow of his bones.

It took Miss MacDonald, though, to understand the reason for his fear.

"Yes, Mr. Stanley," she said, "these men, when they come this time, in spite of their friendship for you, are not going to be as easily satisfied as they were last time. They were able to blink at one murder. They can't keep on blinking. They dare not—even in Nevada."

"Who wants them to blink?" Sam bluffed.

"You do. We all do, for the present."

Sam did not answer that. He stood, and looked stupid.

"Won't you listen to reason," she urged, "before you go downstairs to telegraph for other detectives? In talking to you this way, I am putting all of my pride behind me, and I am violating my own code of professional ethics; so I want to say, first, that if you will allow me to remain on this case, I'll take not one cent in payment. Wait! Let me have my say out, and then you may have yours. My motives are not entirely unselfish—motives seldom are. For one thing, I have never been dismissed from a case. It is a humiliation I would pay any price to avoid. I have other reasons—but no matter. That is my side of it.

"Your side of it is this. If, when the coroner and the others, arrive today, you confess that no progress has been made, they will undoubtedly step in and take matters into their own bungling hands. I think that they would make an arrest. That would be fatal, now. For I am positive that they would arrest an innocent person, and that the guilty person would then have an excellent opportunity for escape.

"I have a certain reputation, Mr. Stanley, and these men—particularly the sheriff—respect it. If you will keep me on this case, I will tell them that I am making definite progress. That I believe I shall be able to turn the criminal over to the state within a comparatively short time—"

"Would that be the truth?" Sam demanded.

She hesitated. "If you mean, is that what I believe now—my answer is yes. I may be wrong. I have, at last, a very definite suspicion. I have no proofs."

"You wouldn't," Sam questioned, "give these men that assurance if you knew that I was going to get some men detectives up here to work with you?"

"I couldn't," she said. "I can speak only for myself. I do not, cannot work with detectives not of my own choosing. I would give whoever you brought here my notes—the definite results of my investigations so far. I would have no right, now, to give them anything else."

"In other words," Sam said, "you don't care a whoop about having the murderer discovered unless you can do the discovering your self, and get the credit for it?"

"Sam Stanley!" I said.

Her cheeks flamed. "Please get your other detectives here as soon as possible, if you wish them to consult with me before I leave for San Francisco."

John's voice came calling down the hall. "Dad? Are you up here?"

"Wait!" Miss MacDonald commanded. "Tell him to wait a moment."

Sam opened the door a crack. "I'll be with you in a minute, son." He closed the door, and stood looking questions at Miss MacDonald.

She walked quickly across the room, and stopped close to Sam, facing him. "I'm sorry I lost my temper, just now. I'm not going, unless you force me to go. Please don't. Please give me my chance. Do you realize what it means to be tried for a murder, even if one is acquitted? I am not asking this for myself. I wouldn't stoop to beg for anything for myself as I am begging for this, now. I am sure you mean to be a fair man. Be fair to me, and to all of the innocent people here on your ranch. I don't say that other detectives might not be able to discover the murderer. I do say that I am certain they would do irreparable harm before they succeeded."

"If you stayed," Sam had the cheek to question, "and worked along with them—that was my idea—couldn't you prevent their doing any harm?"

"I could try to. I will try to, if you insist. But I am doubtful of my success. Consciously, or unconsciously, they work against me, because I am a woman. You don't know them as I do. You don't know their methods, as I do. If you feel that you must have others here, working on the case, allow me to send, at my own expense, for my own assistants; the girls whom I have trained—"

"We don't need any more girls around here," Sam said. "It is pretty certain that we do need someone to protect the lives of all of us on this place—"

"When you telephone for the coroner," she said, "won't you telephone for a locksmith to come out with him, and bring strong bolts for all the doors—"

"You admit, then, that we are all in danger?"

"Nothing of the sort. You are all perfectly safe—at present. I do believe that either now, or before long, my own life is in terrible danger. I want no one to think that I suspect that. I need the protection of the bolts. It must seem that I think that everyone needs the protection."

"You believe," Sam questioned, "that your own life is in danger. And yet—"

"Please re-consider, Mr. Stanley. Please allow me to have the case alone, at any rate for a little while longer."

"Game!" Sam had muttered it to himself, but I had heard it. I knew that she had won, for the present, at any rate.

"You honestly think," he questioned, "that you can manage this single-handed, and keep us all safe, and produce this murderer—pretty shortly?"

"I do, Mr. Stanley."

"And you honestly think that other detectives coming here now might make a peck of trouble, arrest the wrong person, and mess things up generally?"

"I have never been more certain of anything. I think the fact that you dismissed me, now, and sent for others, would be damning evidence against innocence, to the men from Telko.

"Let me meet them, in my professional capacity, today, Mr. Stanley. Let me meet them, not as a failure, but as a person confident of success. I know that I can manage them, and send them away satisfied. Mary, can't you say something? Won't you help me to persuade Mr. Stanley?"

"You don't need any help," I told her. "He's persuaded."

"Is that true, Mr. Stanley? May I have the case alone, for a litle while longer?" She was all breathless with eagerness.

"Drat it all, yes," Sam said. "I'm damned if I know what I ought to do. But you are dead game. I—well, shake on it, Miss MacDonald. You'll do the best you can for us, I know that."

The hand she held out to him was trembling, and her voice, as she thanked him. But still I was amazed when, right after Sam had gone out of the room, she said to me, "Mary, I believe on my soul that I have just had an experience that is too strong for me," and hid her face in the crook of her arm and began to cry.

CHAPTER LIV

DELAY

I MYSELF heard the sheriff say to Sam, late in the afternoon of the day we had found Canneziano, strangled in his bed, "I tell you what, Sam, this is a pretty dirty business—all of it. If you had anyone but Lynn MacDonald on the case, I reckon it would be up to us boys to step in and take a hand. But she has sure given us some pretty good dope—and we're waiting. She's got the rep. There's that Dolingfetter movie murder. She put that through when all the police force and all the dicks in the country had failed for a year. And the Van Muiter case and a dozen others. I know you're square, Sam. All us guys around here know it. But I'm damn' glad you've got Lynn MacDonald on the job to prove it to the country."

As I say, I heard that conversation with my own ears. And yet, in the week that followed, I had times of thinking that, anyway, Sam had likely made a mistake in keeping Miss MacDonald on, alone.

I couldn't begin to describe the horror of that week. It is, I suppose, what books call a paradox to say that the worst thing about the week was that nothing, just nothing, happened. To all outward appearances the Desert Moon Ranch was as peaceful as an empty grave: hollow peace, false peace, and all of us conniving at the falsity made it worse.

One day, for instance, when we were all at dinner, Zinnia dropped the teakettle in the kitchen. We women all screamed. Sam whipped his six-gun from his back pocket. John rushed to the kitchen. He came back, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Zinnia dropped the teakettle. It didn't hurt her."

We all looked foolish, and began to be very busy, passing things, and pretending that our actions had all been the ordinary, conservative actions of people who had heard anything heavy dropped.

Sam locked up the house early every evening. Then, trying to make it casual, one and another of us would go sauntering around to make sure that he hadn't overlooked a door, or a window. People were constantly jumping, and starting, and looking behind them at nothing. None of us women ever went far from the house, except Mrs. Ricker to visit Martha's grave. For one thing, Sam had increased the guard around the place, and I never felt sure, when I ran down to the dairy, that one of the cowpunchers wouldn't think I was trying to escape and take a shot at me. For another thing, though both murders had been done in the house, there was a feeling of safety about four walls that I couldn't get in the open air.

As I have said, Mrs. Ricker went every day to visit Martha's grave. She went alone. I would not have gone with her, not for any price. I was afraid of her. I was afraid of Hubert Hand. By Wednesday of that week I was afraid of everyone in the house except Miss MacDonald and Sam. Friday found me doubtful of Sam.

Losing my mind? Of course I was, or it was losing itself in the black shadow of crime, by which the Desert Moon had been eclipsed. A mind can't go straight, in darkness, any more than a body can. None of our minds went straight, those days. I am sure that the mind of each one of us on the place—always excepting Miss MacDonald's—did as mine did. It went groping in the dark; it bumped into obstacles of doubt; it tripped over fear and fell into senseless stupidities; it lost its way, and wandered into wild suspicions. I tell you, there were times, during those frightful days, when I found myself seriously considering whether or not I had committed the two murders.

On Thursday evening, of that week, Mrs. Ricker said to me, with no concern at all in her manner, "I wish I knew just how that lethal chamber, that they use for executions in this state, felt. Whether it hurts to be executed that way, and how long it takes to die in it, and all about it.

"Because," she went on still unconcernedly, "if it didn't hurt too much, I'd much rather confess to the murders, and get it over, than to keep on living like this. I am going insane. I think that I can't stand another week like this one. Every hour, now, is worse than a quick, painless death. Too, I'm afraid of what I might do, if I go clear mad, with all these horrors in my mind. Though, perhaps, I have already gone mad. Do I seem to you to be insane, right now, Mary?"

I told her no. But it was a flat lie. At that moment I was certain that everyone on the place was more or less insane, especially Miss MacDonald. I think yet that I was right about the others. I know, now, that I was wrong about Miss MacDonald; but she had certainly given me plenty of reasons for thinking either that she had lost her senses entirely, or else that she had never had any to lose.

Apparently, after Sam had agreed to keep her on the case, she had at once given up all interest in it. She had a short talk with me, and told me that she would no longer need my help, and expressly instructed me to stop watching Danny and the others.

"As far as it is humanly possible," she said, "I want you to go about the business of living as if nothing at all unpleasant, even, had happened. I don't want this to be an appearance. I want it to be a fact."

Then, as if she knew I couldn't follow those fool instructions, and as if she were bound to have them followed at any cost, she began to follow them herself. She got sort of childish about it.

On Tuesday evening she produced a bunch of paper and some pencils. When we had all thought that something important was going to happen, she suggested that we play that old, silly game of "Consequences." And when we one and all had other things to do, she was none too pleasant about it. Said that she was tired of reading, every evening, and that the radio made her nervous. She fussed about, until Danny, feeling as she did, got John and Hubert Hand to make up the four to play Bridge.

All week I could see Sam watching her and growing more and more impatient. On Thursday he said to me that she was too busy flirting with John to have time for anything else. That was not fair. She didn't flirt with John—she wasn't the sort who would flirt with anyone. But she surely did begin to notice him, and his attentions to her. It was not that she treated him too well, in any way. It was, only, that she did not treat him quite according to our standards for the way unengaged girls should treat engaged, or married men. Not once did she encourage him to neglect Danny; but after John had neglected her, Miss MacDonald seemed to be usually, right on the spot, ready, waiting and willing, to be pleasant and friendly to him.

I tried to make excuses for John. Poor little Danny wasn't, I had to admit, much like the girl he had fallen in love with. She had lost practically all of her prettiness, and she looked, all the time too white and wan and generally dragged out to seem quite wholesome. Like the rest of us, the strain of fear and suspicion, was too much for her; but she was frailer than any of us, so the strain told harder on her.

She had explained to John about the reference to her doll in the code letter. He had taken it all right, and had been, as she said to me, "sweet" about it, and never doubting her word at all. Still, I sort of thought that a grain of suspicion might still be bothering him. And I knew that he had not been quite able to forgive her, not for telling of her suspicions concerning Sam, but for suspicioning Sam in the first place.

Yes, I could make some excuses for John. But the process of trying not to blame him, personally, resulted in my opinions of men in general being forced down several degrees. As I may have suggested, that took them just about to where the thermometer stops registering.

On Friday morning, when Sam came zig-zagging into my kitchen, ordered Zinnia out of it, his voice all thick and husky, and fell down into a chair, I did not doubt for a minute that he was dead drunk. I knew that he had not touched a drop of liquor for forty years; but what men could do, men might do, and worse.

"Mary," he said, "we've got the report from the 'Frisco chemists."

CHAPTER LV

THE THIRD MURDER

MISS MACDONALD had thought it necessary to have Martha's body exhumed and sent to San Francisco. That is what the coroner and the undertaker had been about on their second trip to the ranch. Sam had not wanted any of us to know about it, particularly he had not wanted Mrs. Ricker to know. That had suited Miss MacDonald better, too; so they had had the men do the work while we were all at dinner that day. They had been careful to fix the grave so that it would not show that it had been disturbed; and then, being men, they had left their shovels right there in the cabin for the first person to find. As you know, the first person had been Mrs. Ricker.

We had been waiting ever since for the chemist's report. Sam's looks and actions, now, kept the question from my lips. I thought that the report must have contained some new horror. In a way, it had; but Sam's first words were reassuring.

"It is too good to be true," he said, and repeated, dazedly, "too good to be true. Miss MacDonald had her assistants trace the prescription from Doctor Roe. The powders were harmless. I didn't cause my girl's death. The report proves—Miss MacDonald says—the report proves—"

"Take it easy, Sam. What does the report from those 'Frisco chemists prove?"

"Somebody gave her a deadly poison. The chemists found two traces. One they can't analyze. That's why they've kept us waiting so long for the report. They are still working on it, hoping for results. The other was nitrobenzene. Miss MacDonald says that, in small doses, it induces coma and takes as long as twenty-four hours to act. But it is apt not to be deadly by itself. It was combined with this other drug—the one that must have made death certain."

Miss MacDonald came hurrying into the kitchen. She was holding the monkey charm bracelet in her hand.

"See here," she said, "this bangle thing opens. I think we can be certain that the poison she took, or was given, came out of it. There is a trace of the odor. Smell it."

She handed it to me. It smelled a little like shoe polish, with sort of a faint almond flavoring, underneath. I gave it to Sam, who had been reaching out his hand for it. He smelled it, and then knotted it up in his fist.

Remembering, I can't think of anything that he said which would do to quote. The gist of it was, that if Gaby had given Martha the poison, he was not sorry that Gaby had been killed, because justice had been done. He went on to say that, if she had not given it to Martha purposely, but only carelessly, forgetting its deadliness, he reckoned that things had turned out for the best, as far as Gaby was concerned, anyway. Not satisfied with that, he expressed, violently, his regrets that vengeance had been taken out of his hands.

"It isn't vengeance you want, Mr. Stanley," Miss MacDonald reminded him, pretty sternly, "but justice. That is within our reach. I am practically certain that the person who poisoned Martha, who strangled Miss Canneziano and her father, is right here on this place—"

"Hold on," Sam interrupted. "Considering that this person is a poisoner and a strangler, and that he is around loose and careless, and that we may all be murdered in our beds, or out of 'em, or poisoned at our meals, it seems to me the next move is to telephone to the sheriff, and have him out here in a hurry, with some men—"

"Nothing of the sort," Miss MacDonald

snapped at him. "I have told you before, and I tell you again, that as matters stand now I am the only person on the ranch who is in the least danger. I did not say that I was certain. I said that I was practically certain. I can't be certain until I have some proof, some evidence. At present, I have not one scrap of either—"

"Then you can't know who the guilty person is."

"Exactly what I have just said. My work from now on is to get that proof. If you would help me, instead of—"

Sam interrupted, his whole body straining forward with his eagerness. "Tell us who he is, and where he is, and we'll help you, right enough."

"I can't tell you. Not unless you want to have still another murder on the Desert Moon Ranch. But you can help me. First, by keeping the discovery of the poison a secret. Second, by allowing everyone else on the place to suppose that I am still in a state of entire bafflement concerning the crime. Third, and most important, perhaps, by having patience with me."

"Ye'a," Sam said, "and while we are sitting around, having patience, this bird will walk off to some green hill far away. I think the boys are doing their best to guard the place, but this bird's a slicker. What's to keep him from, say, dressing in my clothes some night, and riding merrily away on Bobbie Burns or Wishbone? All he'd have to do is to give the boys a high-sign and they'd let him ride to hell, if they thought he was me. Another thing —I can't trust all my punchers. Some of them are greasers, some half-breeds. Money, and not much of it, talks pretty loud to some of those boys."

"At present, the person I suspect has no intention of leaving the place."

"When you don't know anything else, how can you know that?"

"I didn't say that I didn't know anything else."

"Do you know, and will you tell me, why you can't put this fellow where the dogs won't bite him, while you are collecting the proof, evidence, and so on that you think you need?"

"For one reason, because I am not a police detective. Sometimes it is necessary to use their method of arresting each suspect and getting the evidence afterward—third degrees so on. That method, by the way, accounts for the number of criminals who are able to make complete escapes. It is a stupid, bungling method and a brutal one. I detest it. I have used it only twice in the seven years that I have been in this work. I used it then because it was necessary. I will not use it now, because it is not necessary. This case will come to the grand jury complete, with indisputable proofs. If I had known —suspected I mean, before Mr. Canneziano was killed, what I now suspect—" She stopped short, evidently afraid of saying too much.

"Ye'a," Sam argued, "but nothing has happened since then. What I can't get, is how you think you are ever going to find the proof, the evidence."

"Well," she began. "Because," she finished, quite tartly, and walked out of the room.

" 'Because,' " Sam mimicked, almost before she was out of hearing distance. "It was a black day for me, and for the Desert Moon, when I put this thing up to a 'because' woman."

I more than half agreed with him, but I was not going to let him know it. "Did you notice," I questioned, mostly to turn his mind from the subject of 'because' women, "that she kept saying that she thought the person she suspected was on the place? I mean—she didn't say that he was living in the house."

"House! Hell! Of course she didn't say house. Why should she say house? Haven't we been over and over it. Aren't we fair frazzled out, every last one of us, from climbing up those front and back stairs, with our minds, all day long and half the night. Counting minutes, counting seconds; going to the barn and back, over and over. Nobody who lives in this house could have done it. That is settled. That is fact. Not unless some one of us was able to be in two places at the same time between four and five o'clock that day."

Something clicked in my mind. I declare to goodness, I felt the click, plain as a twinge of toothache. It scared me. I put both my hands over the place in the front of my head. I felt as dazed, and as shaken, as if I had been sleep-walking, and had bumped into a door, in the dark, and wakened to find myself in a strange, brightly lighted room.

"No! sir-ee," Sam went on, too busy with his own ideas, I suppose, to notice my actions, which must have been peculiar, "if the murderer is still on the place, he is skulking around here in hiding. It is that strangler fellow, all right. I'll bet my last dollar on it. For some reason, he is trying to clean out the Canneziano family—all of them. I'll bet he told Martha to give the poison to Danny, not knowing what a child Martha was—or, maybe, knowing it. Martha, supposing the poison was candy, or something nice, ate it up herself. I tell you what, I'm going to do some proof hunting, now, on my own hook. If I find some stranger hiding out on this place, that will be good enough proof for Sam Stanley, and for any jury in Nevada.

"Of course, Mary, it hasn't been so hard on you—not having to feel the responsibility the way I have. But I've come to the end of my rope. I'm going to use my own head, now. I've got to get an expert here, for one thing, to watch and guard over Danny. Say, what's the matter with you, Mary? You look so funny. Do you feel sick, or something?"

"Something," I said, "but, at that, I suppose it isn't near as bad as feeling responsibility."

If I'd stayed there, listening to him for one more minute I'd have burst. I left him, and went running, like the crazy thing I was, up the back stairs to my own room.

CHAPTER LVI

A WHISPER

I STAYED in my room for half an hour, thinking with all my might that I was thinking. At the end of that time, discovering that I had not turned out one single rational thought, I gave it up and went to find John.

I forgot all about the men who were guarding the ranch. I went straight down to the outfit's quarters. I hadn't been on the back of a horse for more than ten years. I got a lazy puncher to stop doing nothing long enough to saddle an old nag for me, and boost me up on her, and off I went.

Jogging along through the clean, clear air, I at last began really to do some thinking. I came to my senses in consequence. It was high time. I turned the nag around and rode her back to the outfit's quarters. I slid off of her, and left her there, and went walking back to the house.

It was fortunate that I had given up my wild-goose chase. There on the porch sat John, talking to Miss MacDonald. When I got close enough to them to see how he looked, I felt as if my heart would break for him. He looked, in spite of his tan, like death.

When I had reached the foot of the steps, both of them, without saying an aye, yes, nor no to me, got up and went into the house.

My legs were shaking under me. I had to go slowly up the steps. Neither John nor Miss MacDonald was in the living-room when I got there. I went on into the kitchen.

Miss MacDonald was putting on her big apron. Zinnia was clattering the silver in the dining-room.

"John knows, doesn't he?" I questioned.

"Knows?"

"I think that I know what you—"

"Don't!" she shot out at me, and I wouldn't have jumped any higher if she had shot a gun instead of a word.

"Don't," she calmed down and came over to me and spoke in a whisper, "say anything in here. Not anything."

"I've got to," I said. "I'm human. You listen to me." I whispered it, right into her ear.

I hadn't half finished what I had to say before she moved away from me; but she nodded her head, with those quick, short little nods that always mean confidential agreement.

For almost an hour I had been thinking that I knew it. That nodding of hers made me realize that I had only feared it; that I had believed that she could deny and disprove it.

I had planned biscuits for dinner. I went and got out the bread-board, and opened the flour bin, but I couldn't do it.

"I'm sorry," I said, and to my disgust I began to cry. "I guess you'll have to make out to do alone, for a while. I—I'm not feeling well. I'll have to go and lie down—"

Still blubbering and blind with tears I

went upstairs, and bumped into Sam, standing outside John's door. I dried my eyes and saw that he was holding his six-gun, ready for shooting, in his hand.

CHAPTER LVII

GRIEF

"WHAT is the matter with you?" I demanded. "What are you doing with that gun?"

"John is in there packing his valise. He says he is going to leave the place. I say he is not."

"Going to say it with the six-gun, if necessary, ugh?" I asked.

"If necessary. Mary, by God, he put it up to me, straight. He came to me, and said that he had to get off the place for a while. Had to. I baited him along. Asked him where he wanted to go. He didn't even try to hide his feelings. Didn't bother to make up an excuse. Said it was all the same to him where he went; 'Frisco, Reno, Salt Lake, anywhere, just so that he could get away. When I reckoned he'd stay right here, he up with the idea of going down to live with the outfit. He's a fool; so he thinks that I am. Thinks I don't know he could get a good horse, the first night—"

"If John thinks you're a fool," I said, "he's paying you too much respect. I can't think of anything much worse, or more dangerous than a fool, but whatever it is, you are it. It turns me all over to look at you. Give me that gun."

I reached out and took it. His fingers didn't stick to it very long. I judged that he was not quite as eager to shoot John on sight as he had been pretending to be.

"Now get yourself away from here," I said. "Get on downstairs, if you know the way, and eat your dinner. I'll look after John."

"If you help that boy to escape—"

"Escape your foot!" I slipped into John's room, shut the door in Sam's face, and pushed the new bolt into its slot.

John's things were all strewn about; his valise was standing open on a chair, but he had stopped trying to pack it. He was lying face down on the bed.

I went and sat on the bed beside him and put an arm around his shoulders.

"Mary?" he questioned.

"Yes. There, there now, John dear. Try to brace up—"

"You don't know!"

"Yes, I do know, dear. I know just what you know."

"My God," he groaned. "It is certain, then? I still had a little hope. I—I can't keep on with life, not after this. When I think of these last weeks—I—I'm filthy, I tell you."

"John, dear," I tried to comfort. "You didn't know—you couldn't. You aren't to blame. You are young—"

I knew that I had no comfort for agony such as his, but I could not bear to leave him; so I stayed, hoping, as I suppose foolish women have always hoped, that just plain, quiet loving him might help a little.

After a minute or two, he said, "Mary—if you don't mind, I—I've got to fight this out alone."

I went to my own room. I put a cold water compress on my eyes, and pulled down the window-shades and lay on my bed. I was mortal tired from sorrow, and the hurt in my heart for John was sharp as a neuralgia pain, but my mind went working right along, independent of my feelings; straight on, like a phonograph, if somebody had started it, might keep right on grinding out a tune while the ship that it was on was sinking.

When Miss MacDonald came up, bringing me some dinner, which I couldn't touch, I said to her, "It seems true, but I know that it can't be. It is too impossible. I mean—too far fetched."

"Not a bit of it," she said. "The only impossible thing about it, is the length of time it has taken us to discover it. Of course—forgive me, Mrs. Magin, I was almost on the trail once, I had at least started in the right direction, and then you threw me completely off of it."

"I! How?"

She smiled at me. "By seeing something which you did not see. But you are not in the least to blame for that. The fault is all mine."

She went and shut my transom. She looked through my clothes-closet. She looked under my bed, saying, as she did so, "The proverbial practise of old maids, you know." She came and sat close beside me.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE PUZZLE

"LISTEN. Bit by bit it works into the whole, like a picture puzzle, each segment slipping right into place. There is just one hole in it all, and I think your Danny's kindness, and unselfishness will supply that necessary bit."

She began then, to use her own way of saying it, to put together the pieces of the puzzle. She was right. Bit by bit it fitted together. Almost at once she came to the place that she had called a hole.

"There is no hole there," I told her. "Under those circumstances, Danny would have been just sweet, and unselfish, and foolish enough to have done that very thing. She did it. That was why she was worried and unhappy, all that day."

"I'm sure of it. Now then—" She went on: "Danny's calling after Gaby that day—easy to understand now, of course, and leading straight to Chad's suicide and confessional note. Gaby's fear; Martha's murder; Sam's pipe ashes on the bag; Gaby's note to Danny; each one fitting right into place, until spread in front of me, was one of the most hideous pictures that any human being has ever been forced to look at."

"Only," I gasped, "there can't be such wickedness in the world! I mean—not such long wickedness."

"In all of my experience," she said, "I have never investigated another murder case where the thing was so cruelly, vilely premeditated; so wickedly, cunningly carried out. If this is true, it will be, also, the first time that I have found a really brilliant mind belonging to a fiend."

"If it is true!" I echoed. "But it is proven. You have just proven it all, to me."

She shook her head. "We have a seemingly perfect fabric made up, wholly, of circumstantial evidence. As yet, we have nothing else. Now I have a question to ask you. It will seem to you that I should have asked you this at least a week ago. I did not, because I was certain that, unless I shared all of my suspicions with you, your answer would be exactly the answer that you gave me before. Now, thinking as you think, I want a very careful answer to this question.

When she had asked it, I refused my first impulse to answer it, at once, and sat thinking carefully for several minutes. The answer that I was forced to give, then, made me sick with shame.

"No," I said, "I didn't. I thought, honestly, that I did. But now I know that I didn't. That—that," I knew I was chattering it, "puts Canneziano's murder right at my door—"

"Nonsense," she folded one of my trembling hands into her steady, capable hands. "We can't go poking about like that, into the machinery of fate, and stay sane. The blame in this case is entirely for me. But, if I had not allowed myself to be misled then, but had worked straight on, something equally tragic might have happened. We don't know. What we do know is, that no more time must be wasted.

"I have spent this past week in trying to obtain the necessary proof. I have failed. Now, I am going to ask you to help me. Will you?"

"I will, and gladly. But you'll have to tell me what you want me to do. I haven't the faintest idea."

She told me.

"Lands alive!" I said. "That ought to be easy."

I could see that she was annoyed. "I haven't found it so," she said. "I have made three attempts, as many as I dared make, this week, and have failed. Do you realize that it must come simply, and naturally? You must realize that—"

"See here," I interrupted, "why not do as Sam wants you to do? Why not arrest the criminal now, and force the proof, afterwards? This sort of evidence could be gotten then, as well as now, and a lot safer, too, it seems to me."

"Mrs. Magin," she said, "until we have evidence of guilt we have no criminal to arrest. Incredible as it seems, we might still be wrong concerning every bit of this. I once made a horrible mistake. It was on my third case, that is, after I began to work for myself. I don't talk about it. I can't think about it. But I made myself a promise then, a promise that I have never broken, and which I never will break. Except in extreme necessity, proof, positive, and perfect, must come before any accusation or arrest in a case of mine. Twice, as I have said, I have had men arrested because of circumstantial evidence. Each time the evidence was far stronger than anything we have in this case. The first time, the man would have undoubtedly escaped if he had not been put in confinement. The second time was on my third case, which I have mentioned. If you force me to make this the third time—"

"I can't force you to do anything," I reminded her, hoping to cool her down a bit.

"Yes, you can. If you go at this so clumsily that you give the thing away, and so endanger your own life, I shall have to force matters. I must, of course, risk a reputation—I'm not speaking of my own, you understand—in preference to risking a life—again I am not speaking of my own. But, if we are wrong in this, and remember *we may be*—circumstantial evidence is the trickiest thing in the world—, it would be bitterly cruel and wrong. It would be even worse than that other mistake of mine. Will you remember that, when you make your first attempt?"

"Yes, I'll remember. When do you want me to make the first attempt?"

"As soon as possible. This afternoon, if you can do it."

"But, how shall I do it?"

"I am going to leave that to you, and to your natural wit. You can do it much more spontaneously if you are not attempting to follow set directions. But do, do be careful. Don't make a mistake."

With that she left me. I am ashamed to say that excitement had made me forget my sorrow. I sat there saying my prayers, planning, and shaking in my shoes, for a good half hour before I could get up enough courage to go downstairs. In all probability, the next hour would bring me face to face with the murderous fiend; and not by the blink of an eye, not by the ghost of a shiver, must I betray my horrible knowledge.

CHAPTER LIX

THE FATAL MISTAKE

WHEN I finally did get myself downstairs, I found Sam, seemingly alone in the living-room, playing solitaire. I judged, from the look he gave me, and from the way he had his shoulders hunched, that he was still in a right ugly humor.

"Where's everybody?" I asked.

"Out committing murders, somewhere, likely."

"That's a nice way to talk, isn't it?"

He mumbled something.

"What?" I said. "I can't hear you when you mutter like that."

"I didn't talk much louder when I told Miss MacDonald about John's trying to make a getaway. She heard me all right. That's all the good it did. Do you know how much I trust that woman?"

"No, I don't know. I don't care, either."

Sam got out that silly, shrill voice he has for talking when he is trying to mock a woman, any woman, and in using it he spoke up real loudly. "Well, Mr. Stanley, why not allow your son to go down and live with the ranch hands, in their houses, for a time, since he is so eager to do so?"

"Well, what about that?"

"Ahk!" Sam barked. "She is head over heels in love with him; that's a part of what is the matter with her."

I said, "I wish I thought so."

"Why do you wish that, Mary?" It was Danny's voice. Her white face, with the big, sorrowful eyes peeked around the high back of a chair near the fireplace.

I was too taken aback to answer her.

"How long have you been sitting there, eavesdropping, young lady?" Sam asked.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," she answered, quietly. "I am sorry. I was reading, and didn't hear anything until you began to mimic Miss MacDonald. I heard all of that then. Why does John wish to go down and live with the outfit?"

"John and Sam had a little trouble, today," I told her.

Sam, with his usual helpfulness in embarrassing situations, pushed back his chair and went walking fast out of the room.

"Mary," she questioned, "why aren't you my friend, any more?"

"Lands, child," I said, "if you mean that because I was wishing Miss MacDonald was in love with John, it was only because I've always reckoned that the more women in love with a man the better for him. John loves you. What do you care how many women love him?"

"John doesn't love me, any more. I suppose that was what he and uncle were quarreling about? John wants to get away from me, is that it? And Uncle Sam is so good, and so loyal, that he won't allow it?"

"Nothing like that," I scoffed. "It was only—" I left the sentence unfinished, and went into the kitchen.

She followed me. I went straight to the stove and picked up the lid lifter, which, as usual when I'm not there to watch, someone had left sticking up in a stove-lid to get red hot, instead of hanging it on the hook where it belonged. I dropped it with a howl; and, wrapping my hand in my apron, told her to run and get the linseed oil and limewater, up in the hall bathroom, for me.

I am not saying that I was not to blame. I do say that, if that fool child Zinnia had not jumped around shouting, "Sody! Sody! Wet sody's the best for burns—" and that, if Mrs. Ricker hadn't heard her screeching, and come in, too, and begun asking questions, I certainly would not have overlooked the fact that, before she went to minister to my needs, Danny had picked up that lid lifter, from where I had dropped it on the floor, and had hung it on its hook.

She made a quick trip upstairs and down again, with the bandages, and the lotion. She offered, sweet and sympathetic, to do up my hand for me. I had noticed, by that time, that my hand was not smarting much, but I was too excited to account for it reasonably. I asked Mrs. Ricker to attend to the bandages. I had another job for Danny.

"I just came out here," I said, "to make my weekly list to send to Telko for supplies. I can't write with this wadded up hand. Will you make the list for me, Danny? Zinnia, please hand her the pad and pencil from the shelf."

Zinnia brought it. Danny sat down by the table and picked up the pencil. My heart thumped in my throat.

"One crate of Fallon melons," I said.

Danny pushed the pad and pencil across the table to Mrs. Ricker. "Perhaps you'd as soon make the list for Mary? I have something to attend to upstairs."

"Go on, now you've started it, Danny," I said. "You write such a neat, pretty hand."

"I presume my writing can be read," Mrs. Ricker replied, as she picked up the pencil. "A crate of Fallon melons, did you say?" She wrote it down. I heard Danny running up the back stairway.

I felt flat as rolled dough from my disappointment. In the next minute I had something more than disappointment to bother me.

"I don't see," Zinnia said, "how you made out to burn yourself on that stove, Mrs. Magin. Miss Canneziano was out here, just a while ago, wanting to make some tea. The fire was dead out. She boiled the water on the electric plate."

I ran to the stove. It was as cold as winter time.

CHAPTER LX

THE END

I SUPPOSE it takes more than a minute for one's wits, particularly if they happen to be thick wits, to drain entirely away.

Before mine had completely left me, I had attempted to telephone to Sam, down in the outfit's quarters, and had failed to get a reply to my call. I had told Mrs. Ricker and Zinnia, trying with all my might to hide my fear, to run out and find Sam, or Miss MacDonald, or Hubert Hand, or John—I had forgotten that John was upstairs in his room—and to bring one or all of them to the house as quickly as possible. To this day I don't know why they went, without a question; but they went, running. It was the slam of the screen door behind them, I think, bringing with it as it did the realization of my aloneness and the memory of Miss MacDonald's warning, that turned me clear over to terror.

I shall not describe what I did, nor what I thought, during the time that I was alone there, downstairs, before help arrived. The humorously inclined might think such a description amusing. To me there is nothing amusing in the spectacle of an old woman being gripped and wrung by fright. I longed to run from the house; but I felt that I must stay there to explain the situation to the others when they came, if they ever, ever did come, and then to do my poor best, since I had made the fatal mistake, to prevent catastrophe.

By clock time, it was only thirty-six silent minutes that I had to wait before Miss MacDonald came, alone and unhurried, up the front steps and into the living room.

Still holding Sam's thirty-thirty rifle in my hands—I had known that I could never use it to shoot at any living thing, but I had hoped that it might make me look dangerous—I turned to meet her.

"Don't point that thing at me," she commanded. "Put it down. What are you doing with it? What is the trouble here?"

Before I could answer her, Sam, Mrs. Ricker and Zinnia came clattering through the kitchen.

Mrs. Ricker was wringing her hands and saying over and over, in a voice all broken and mutilated with horror, "I have gone insane. I have gone insane. I have gone insane."

Sam said, "Gabrielle Canneziano just now waved at us from her window."

Miss MacDonald turned and ran like a wild thing up the stairs. Just as she disappeared from our sight the sound of a pistol's shot cracked though the place.

I followed the others. I ran up the steps. I stumbled down the hall, behind them, and into Gabrielle Canneziano's room.

I saw Gabrielle Canneziano, her cheeks painted, her lips reddened, long earrings dangling from her ears, lying on the couch. Over her breast was a widening spot of color, staining the fringes of the soft white silk dressing-gown that she was wearing. On the floor was a smoking revolver.

John came. He said, "She told me what she was going to do. I allowed her to do it. I did not want Nevada to have to execute a woman."

EPILOGUE

SAM says, bitterly, that the only thing I need to explain is the one thing that can ever be explained: how one girl, by changing her clothes and by washing her face, could turn a houseful of supposedly sensible people into a packet of blithering, bat-blind fools for a generous period of time. I can explain that, I think; but I am going to leave it until later, and go clear back to the second of July, the day that Gabrielle received the code letter.

In her talk with John (John says it was in no sense a confession, that it was nothing but a taunt for us all, a final, regretless, high fling of defiance) there in his room, during the twenty minutes or so that she talked to him, before she shot herself, some things, which might still not be clear to us, were made plain. Also, many of Miss MacDonald's previously formed opinions were directly or indirectly verified. Miss MacDonald had said, you remember, that the murder had been wickedly premeditated.

"When I read that letter," Gabrielle said to John, "and found myself penniless and planless on a Nevada ranch, I at once made up my mind to kill Danielle, the little fool, and take her place."

How she persuaded Danny to accept the idea of the masquerade, and to change clothes with her, on the fourth of July, we do not positively know. That is the "hole" that Miss MacDonald mentioned in her puzzle. To my mind, there is little doubt that she gained her way very easily, by using her own unhappiness and disappointment as tools with which to remove Danny's scruples and prod her pity. I am sure, remembering Danny's troubled manner at that time, that she consented unwillingly, that she thoroughly disliked the idea, and that she was afraid of its consequences.

When the two girls went upstairs together, on the afternoon of the fourth of July, they must have gone to effect the transformation. Perhaps, then, for a brief minute or two, the thing did seem amusing to Danny; for I know that I heard the girls laughing together, as I have mentioned, when I was on my errand upstairs.

We do not know, when the disguise had been completed, by what pretext Gabrielle lured Danny into the attic. Their trunks were in the attic. There could be a dozen simple reasons why Danny might consent to go up there with her. Coming downstairs again, Gabrielle caught her by the throat, and strangled her, instantly, by means of the deadly jiu-jitsu hold, which she had learned from her "Strangler" lover. It is a hold that requires little strength—though Gabrielle's trained fingers were strong enough—but much scientific skill.

She took the earrings from Danny's ears

—or, perhaps, Danny had not yet put them on—went to her own room, arranged her make-up, got into the wrap, which completely covered Danny's clothes that she was wearing, pulled the hat down over her eyes to conceal the change in hair-dressing, and walked through the living-room, for us all to see her, at four o'clock.

When Chad went to the porch with her (this John found out by insistent questioning) she told him that Danny had left the house, earlier by the back way. That she and Danny had arranged a joke on the rest of us, to enliven the dull afternoon, and asked him to help with it by calling, in Danny's voice to her, when he came back into the house. Chad did it. That was why, since he was standing down by the front doors, the voice supposed to come from the upper hall had a strained and an unnatural sound. Gabrielle had reckoned that Chad, in spite of her request, would be too stupid to discover the facts. Probably she thought that, at any rate, she would be able to impose silence upon him. It was one of her many mistakes. We think that he must have known for the remainder of the afternoon that Gabrielle was masquerading as Danny. His happy mood was caused by the fact that Gabrielle had given him a confidence and had allowed him to perform a small service for her. When he saw what had happened, and when he realized that the girl whom he had worshipped was a murderer, he killed himself. Strange, that in spite of everything, he still loved her enough to leave the confessional note to shield her. The men think that he left the note to shield the rest of us, rather than to shield her. I do not believe it.

She had planned to go straight around the house and re-enter it through the back door. Martha's being by the rabbit hutch was something she had not counted on. It was necessary to distract Martha's attention, and to get her to come at once into the house. She gave her the monkey bracelet. As she did so, probably because of the act of kindness, Martha made one of her frequent mistakes and called Gabrielle "Danny." Gabrielle told John (concerning Martha, John also questioned her insistently) that she then showed Martha the poison in the charm, and told her that it was a love potion that would make Chad love her, "like a lady," if she would swallow it, and never, never tell anyone anything about it. That, of course, was Martha's secret concerning the happy surprize that had to do with herself and Chad.

Martha out of the way, Gaby must have run quickly around to the back of the house and up the back stairway. To toss the hat and wrap back on the body, replace the earrings, scatter the pipe ashes over the beaded bag (I declared to goodness, I can more easily think of her lying there in her white silk dressing-gown, than I can think of her brushing those pipe ashes up, from somewhere, in order to save them for that purpose), and drop the tatting shuttle there, required not more than one or two minutes of time. Another two or three minutes to wash her face thoroughly and to douse on some of Danny's perfume, and she was coming downstairs again, with the headache that necessitated the lowering of the blinds—to make her safety a bit safer, just at first.

She told John that those few minutes when she had to walk through the room, make the trip around the house, and get upstairs again, were the only moments of fright that she had had, from the first to the last. Once safely established in the rôle of Danny, she said, she knew that she had nothing to fear.

I think, however, that there were other times when she was afraid. I am certain that real fear was with her in her room, that day, when the engagement ring dropped from her finger. Though I believe that her fear, then, was caused wholly from superstition, and not from any dread that the slight difference between her hands and Danny's hands might be noticed.

I am sure that her fear for John, on the fourth of July, was real enough. She knew that each minute he was away, longer than the time necessary for the trip, was a minute lost from the perfect alibi she had so mistakenly tried to arrange for him by sending him away from the ranch. She had not known that Danny's fingers had closed on the stair's tread. When John came in the back way she was afraid that it would be remembered later—as it was—and that someone would suspect—as Hubert Hand did suspect—that John had carried the body in at that time.

She had counted on her note to Danny,

and on the fact that, as Danny, she was downstairs within ten or twelve minutes after the time we had seen Gaby walking down the path and had heard Danny's voice calling after her, to prove her own innocence. They, and the gentleness of Danny's disposition, did this to perfection.

Her original plan had been to prove that Sam was the murderer. With Sam out of the way, and with John in possession of his fortune, she had thought, I suppose, that she would have no trouble in persuading John to leave the Desert Moon. But she was afraid of the idea. Knowing John's devotion to Sam, she could not reckon, with any sureness, how such disgrace and sorrow might effect John. It was too big a risk to take, unreservedly. So, though she picked the quarrel with Sam, strewed the pipe ashes on the bag, put the key in the fireplace, wrote on the photograph, she left loopholes in the shapes of the many other false clues. It is only my own notion that, if she had not thought the definite accusation of Sam, which she made during the session on the fifth of July, was necessary to protect John, she would have backed out, by that time, and not have made it.

It is again only my notion that the request, which she put in her note to Danny, to have Danny take her body to San Francisco for cremation, was made because she thought that it would be desirable for her to be able to leave the ranch at once—perhaps for several weeks. Mrs. Ricker's expressed suspicion probably made her realize the wisdom of returning as rapidly as possible to the Desert Moon.

Gabrielle Canneziano was a born criminal. Almost all of her life had been spent among criminals. She knew their ways, and she knew the ways of honest people toward them. Consequently, she was too clever to drop her disguise, even for a minute, in San Francisco.

WHEN, on the afternoon of the fourth of July, she had come downstairs as Danny, she had come resolved from that time forth to be Danny, in thought and in deed, up to the level best of her ability. That she never doubted her ability to turn from black to white within the space of an hour, is a splendid example of Miss MacDonald's contention concerning the egotism of criminals.

Miss MacDonald says that her first real clue was the one I gave to her when I said that no one, except Gaby herself, who would do such a wicked thing, had ever been on the ranch. If she had been on the ranch, she might have committed the murder. She had all three of the primary motives for murder: love, revenge, and greed. The unique feature in this case—Miss MacDonald says that each case has its unique feature—was that the murdered girl had been a duplicate twin.

The hazy, incomplete notion, Miss MacDonald says, had just come into her mind; she had not begun to accept it, she was only allowing it, dimly, to take form, when I returned to the room that day with my hand full of letters written by Danny. Handwriting, as surely as fingerprints, Miss MacDonald says, proves identity.

She asked me, straight, whether I had seen Danny writing the checks and addressing the envelopes. I answered, straight and positively, that I had. (And not twenty minutes before that Miss MacDonald had warned me that people often thought that they saw things they did not see.)

I had not. I had seen the person whom I supposed was Danny writing checks and addressing envelopes. I had turned my back on her, and had walked to the door, when she called after me and gave me the envelopes containing the checks.

Danny herself had written those checks and had addressed those envelopes on the third of July. Owing to all the furore that had been going on in the house that day, she had left her desk before she had torn the checks from her check-book, and had never gone back to it to finish her task. It is possible that Gabrielle had deliberately arranged that, also; but I think not. At any rate, she had had the checks in her possession, and had waited for a date that had a three, or an eight in it, to produce them. Circumstances and I played well into her hands that day; she had only to insert a one in front of the three to make me her tool.

Miss MacDonald, as you have seen, blames herself and not me for the mistake. She says that she should have known better than to believe me; or, to quote her exactly, she should have "doubted your accuracy of observation." But, not until the morning that we found Daniel Canneziano murdered, did it occur to her to doubt it.

She says that it was not clairvoyance, not intuition, not even common sense, that it was nothing but a memory that took her, that morning, straight back to the idea that Gabrielle Canneziano could be the guilty person. Oddly, the conviction had come to her before we found Canneziano's body.

Sitting across the table from Gabrielle, posing as Danny, that morning at breakfast, she had thought, idly, of the breakfast that she and Danny had had together in the dining-car. She had taken her chair, that morning, just as Danny had handed the order slip for her breakfast to the waiter. Too vaguely to be certain that it was really a memory, she seemed to see that slip of paper covered with writing. Just then, with the aroma of coffee in her nostrils, and with her iced grapefruit and rolls in front of her, she remembered that it was the same breakfast both she and Danny had had that morning. Would such a small order cover an order slip with handwriting? Not, it was certain, with the neat handwriting that had made out those checks and addressed those envelopes. Right then she resolved to lose no more time; to get, as soon as possible, a sample of the handwriting of the girl who was sitting across the table from her.

Canneziano's murder, discovered in the next half hour, strengthened her vague suspicions into as much of a certainty as she ever allowed herself before she had positive evidence.

As I have written, she spent the following week in efforts to get that evidence; finally, fearing that she was suspected, she detailed the task to me.

You have seen how I failed with it. How Gabrielle at once saw through my trick of attempting to disable my right hand by burning it; and how, realizing that she was trapped, she had run upstairs, first to satisfy her longing to be herself again, even for a few brief minutes, then to taunt John, and, finally, to take her own life.

For I think, in spite of her denials to John, that she killed herself because she knew that she was trapped, though her vanity and her audacity held to the end.

"I knew I should have no trouble in making you believe that silly doll story," she said. "It was the truth. I knew, too, that the dick would read the code letter. She was so slow about it, that I had to steal it to make her do it. It was time, you see, for the gentle Danielle's story to be verified. I knew that the dick had a copy of it—she'd been baiting me with the thing. I have kept a step or two ahead of her lumbering pace, all the time.

"Don't fancy that I had overlooked the matter of the handwriting. I'm not a fool. I thought of it before I killed the girl. There were a dozen ways I could have gotten around it—could yet get around it. If necessary, I could even have disabled my own right hand. I had rather planned, at first, to do that. But, later I found that I loved my pretty, little white hand better than I had supposed. Just as I have discovered that I loved the gay Gaby better than I had supposed—so well, indeed, that I have decided that death as Gaby is infinitely preferable to life as the shiny-nosed Danielle. I have seen this coming. I have not cared.

"I got rid of that cur, Canneziano, not because I was afraid of him, but because he tried to double-cross me. I had promised to do much for him, after you and I were married; and he would have sold me out for a few thousand dollars. He came here, hoping that Danny might pay him a pretty sum for his silence about my past. He knew his muttons. She would have been just fool enough to have done it; poor slain sister stuff; more to be pitied than blamed, all that, you know. He should have played with me, instead of against me. I had a few old scores to settle with him. Most of my rage about the money was because I had thought it would be such good fun to get the best of him. And I did—so that is all right. I hid in his room early that evening. It was frightfully amusing to watch him locking his door and his windows to make his sleep a safe one. It was. I did the job so neatly that he never woke at all.

"For that matter, it has all been amusing. You have all been such utter fools. But I am tired of it now. Oh, very tired. Particularly, I am tired of my cruel plan to destroy the gay Gaby by burying her alive. I shall do it in a swifter way."

Sam insists that her success, even for so short a time, is an indictment against all of us; that it shows that none of us was capable of looking deeper than clothes and face paint. I do not agree with him. Gabrielle was a professional actress. She had lived with Danny long enough to learn all her ways, her mannerisms, her habits in conversation.

The murder itself, by stupefying us all with horror, with fear, with suspicions, did much to help her. But without that dulling of our perceptions, I think that the imposture would have been successful. At the time of the murder, the two girls had been on the ranch with us less than two months. Strangers never get much deeper than surfaces in so short a time. There was nothing remarkable, it seems to me, about her being able, quite easily, to deceive all of us, with the single, glaring exception of John.

John is one of a large class of people who could all be filed under the recipe for simple acceptors. It is a necessary class; a class that acts as an oil to the hinges of the world, making it move smoothly.

When John came home from Rattail, on the fourth of July, he was faced with the apparent fact that Danny, in the course of a few hours, had changed essentially. That was what had bothered him so; what had made him jerk his head, and blink his eyes, and complain of a touch of sun. John had never recognized, much less admitted to himself, that there was the slightest similarity between the two girls. Consequently, in spite of a change, Danny must be Danny; she looked like Danny, she talked like Danny, and we all said that she was Danny. John believed.

Very shortly after that, John was faced with another apparent fact. Gaby had been murdered.

He at once set the fact of Danny's change against the fact of Gaby's murder —and there he stuck fast; too loyal to go further; too dismayed to retreat. He did not believe that Danny had killed Gabrielle. He had known Danny too well to harbor such a belief. He was forced to believe that she knew who had done it. Consequently, her accusation of Sam could be nothing but a wicked accusation. Only —Danny could not be wicked.

The mystery was a torture which Danny's presence intensified unbearably; so he avoided her; and, unable to blame her for anything, blamed himself and hated himself for his suspicions and for his failing loyalty. I'll venture, though it can be only a venture, that the realization of his interest in Miss MacDonald, and his inability to be rid of it, was another cause for John's befuddlement.

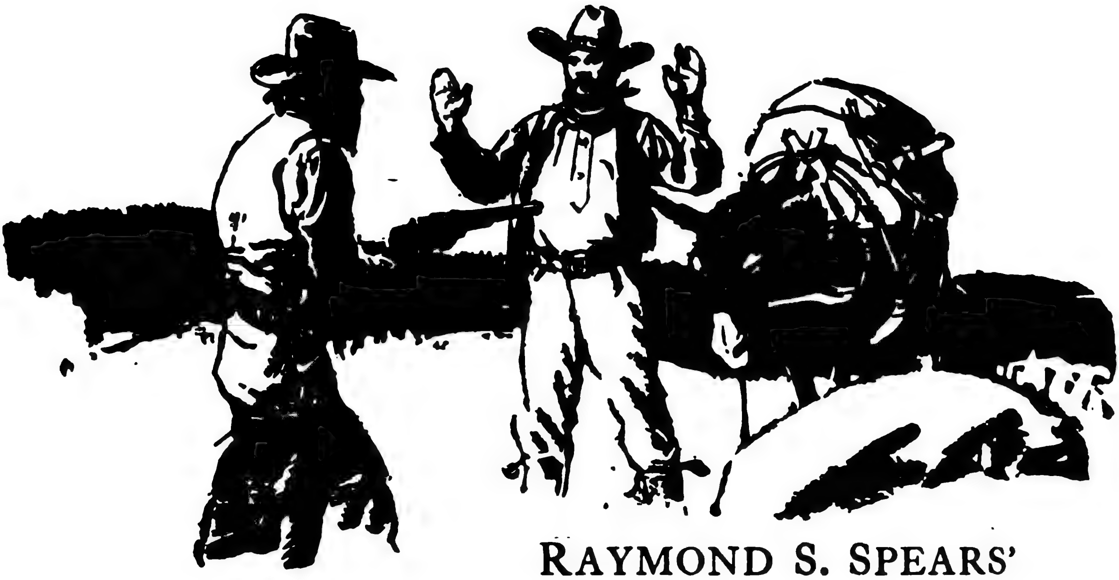
That interest, of course, has all disappeared for the present. Though he despised himself for it, John might have been untrue to a changed, living Danny; might, in the end, have jilted her meanly. John is male. But to a Danny who is no longer living, John, now, must always be true. John is young. I reckon he has fine honest plans for being faithful to her memory for the remainder of his life. Miss MacDonald is also young, and lovely, and heart whole. She has promised to come and visit us for a month next June.

Just now, with our thermometers at fifty below zero, and our chilblains burning, and the coyotes piercing the nights with their lank, long, frozen screeches, and the cold old owls always grieving forth their mournful "chuck-a-loo, whoo, whoo, whoo's" June looks mighty far away.

But, five fingers and a thumb, and she will be here, smelling of warm sunshine and tasting like smiles; painting our deserts with rainbow colors for as far as the eyes can see; spreading sunsets that catch you right up into their midsts; offering dawns that share their youth with you and that make you believe all over again in things which you had long ago stopped believing. Now I don't know shucks about romance; but I have a notion that June, in our northeastern Nevada, stirs up whole batches of the stuff.

It isn't June, though, and it isn't romance that I am counting on for the final chore: it is something more lasting than either, something sturdier, something for which I cannot find a name. But I know that it is induced by a mixture of long years of right living, and clean thinking, and sanity, and courage; so I am expecting it to clear away the shadows from the Desert Moon and leave it, riding high as it used to ride; high and proud, a brave, shining thing in our valley.

THE END



RAYMOND S. SPEARS'

Brief Narrative of the Real West

Jingle Smidt's NUGGET GOLD

EVERY one who paid any attention to gossip heard that Jingle Smidt was working the hills for gold pockets, taking advantage of the occasional showers and cloudbursts to find outwashes of dust or nuggets. No one knew his system of procedure, but the suspicion grew that he had a hoard buried somewhere. Several times he was stopped by bandits and searched on the chance that he was coming in with a burro-load of gold, but the robbers never caught him with a fortune on his person.

After each holdup, Smidt would come to Dulcet with his story of insult, battery and crime. He protested to the sheriff, the city marshal, the express company agents—whose detectives were known to keep close tabs on criminals—and when he would go to saloons or dance halls, where he had the reputation of spending the minimum of money for the maximum of joy, he proclaimed his anger at the assailants and his indignation at the illegality of the whole procedure.

"I don't always stand it," he declared. "Sometimes I vill be so mad I do something!"

But he neglected being angry for a long time. He was watched, but despite an appearance of stupidity, he eluded the spies. He had gold, sure enough, for he paid all his bills in nuggets or dust—and carried away his change in $10 and $20 gold pieces. He never spent any of the minted coins. Coming and going as he did, the estimates were that he had $10,000 at least. Perhaps he had $50,000 or more, especially if he cached his nuggets—except those used for current expenses.

To think that Jingle Smidt, the singing Dutchman, had all that money when others who had no hoarding instinct often lacked for chips to play poker, or even the price of two-bit dances with the stepping beauties of Dulcet was provoking. Wiser prospectors, real mining engineers, often went for years without making a strike. But Jingle, singing his loud doggerel songs, made big money—and spent nothing to speak of.

His main cabin was built of logs in a

beautiful timber belt up the line from Dulcet on the side of the Flower Meadow Range. A good spring at the door, a valley pasture of grass, plenty of game and a lookout on all the Dulcet Basin were features of the location. It was miles from any neighbor, and when snow fell Smidt must tramp on snowshoes down to the valley bottom.

"But I am satisfied," he declared, when warned that he ought to be nearer people, get married or take some kind of precautions.

Jingle Smidt had really brought in a good deal of gold. He had a cache back there on the mountain, and he was nearly ready to dig it out, cash in and go back home to Holland.

One evening he came into his cabin, having hidden his gold—all but a poke of six ounces for supplies—and had just eaten supper when five men came in without hail and without leave. They were masked—unmistakable.

"We're going to give you a chance to save yourself a lot of misery," one declared. "Tell us where is your gold, the big cache, and you can keep your hidden diggings. If you make us put on the screws, though, we won't stop till we know it all."

"I tell you noddings; not now, not anytime," Smidt replied.

He kept his word. The scoundrels were utterly merciless. They talked, Dutchy declared, like educated men—he called them "dudes." They knew cruelties which they must have learned from histories or records of specialty tortures, familiar in the Orient and to savage races. To these they added specialties of their own.

The only wonder was they did not kill him. All night long they plied their ingenuity. At dawn, they played their last throw. Wrapping a rawhide latigo thong around Smidt's two thumbs above the last joint, in and out, over a revolver barrel between them, they turned the gun around and around, drawing the line so tight that at last it cut to the bone and flew off the ends of the members.

Smidt fainted, but he did not tell. When he came to, his visitors had taken their departure. He had brought in a pint of balsam, tapped from the trees, and with this he covered the burns, the cuts, the tortured places and bandaged himself the best he could. Then he went down to Dulcet and complained again to the authorities.

ALWAYS in the past the sheriff and city departments had laughed at his complaints. Now, when they saw the surgeons dressing the injuries the brutal criminals had inflicted in the effort to obtain the fortune Smidt's industry had earned, not one laughed. But still they could think of nothing to do.

"This is all I shall stand," Smidt declared. "They stole my outfit, some. They took my pocket money, some. They steal a leetle of dis and dat. Now look't! My hands like dat. On me, fire blisters. I limp by my feet like I vas a greenhorn, but I ain'd. I tell you, dem fellers I have by my suspicions. So, by golly, donnervetter, I am not finish—no!"

There was feelingless, heartless laughter in the saloons, dance halls and gambling dens, when Smidt came limping through, his flat face scarred where the robbers had pulled the whiskers out by the roots, and his thumbs standing up in their bandages so he had to take hold of a glass with just his fingers.

For nearly two weeks he limped and loafed around town, waiting for the wounds to heal, as he said. Sympathy for his suffering was lost in the joke of his anger and his demand for justice. Every day he went to the sheriff's office, but Smiling Jim Stilks denied knowing who had done the crime. City Marshal Hawky Clode gave the same reply.

"Vell, vhy don' you find um, den?" Smidt cried.

"Why don't you?" the officials retorted, brightly.

"I tell you who did it and cut me up," Jingle declared to Clode and Stilks when he found them in the sheriff's office together. "It vas Jack Kimval, Dan Riskey, Juke Hanax, and dem two Lodane brothers."

"Like spots it is!" Stilks retorted, angrily. "You say Jack Kimval who owns the Sapphire Ledge tortured you?"

"Dat's de feller! I know him by his funny ring on his leetle finger."

"The Lodane boys never stole a dollar in their lives," Clode added, sharply. "They'll kill you if we tell them you say they tortured you."

"You look on Wallace's chaps, ver' the

end of my thumb hit, and the blood ain'd off yet," Smidt declared, stubbornly.

"Now look here," Stilks said, seriously. "You shut up, Smidt. If you say one word, those men'll kill you on sight. You're calling them robbers!"

"Dat's right. They are." Smidt nodded. "I find out. You said so, I should. Now I tell you——"

"You mean to tell me my business, you blanked Dutchman?" Hawky Clode snarled. "You're insulting as white men as ever came to Dulcet!"

"Dat may be," Smidt declared, "but look what dey done to me, which ain'd so good, I tell you."

The two officers looked at each other. Smidt would not be denied. He gave his reasons for identifying each one of the five. The two cross-questioned him, and he could not be shaken. They begged Smidt for his own sake not to arouse those haughty, high-spirited men, who would be sure to kill him for the grave insult in the charges he brought against them, Dan Riskey being a bad-man, and Juke Hanax a killer. They assured Smidt he would better leave well enough alone.

"Vat you goin' to do about it?" Smidt demanded, when they had argued.

"What'll we do?" Stilks cried. "Nothing. That's your private business. You haven't any proof—has he, Hawky?"

"Not a smitch of it." The city marshal shook his head, angrily. "They'll kill us if we say a word——"

"Vat? Is it my private bus'ness?" Smidt asked. "Can I settle mit it?"

"Sure!" the two nodded, "Only be danged careful how you do it."

"How you mean, careful?"

"Oh—why—well, make them admit they did it, you know."

"I see." Jingle Smidt nodded. "If they say they done it, dat's all I must have to settle mit dem?"

"Sure!"

Jingle Smidt pounded out, a short-legged, barrel-bodied man. Stilks sent a deputy to warn Jack Kimval and Juke Hanax. Clode notified the two Lodane brothers. They couldn't find Dan Riskey. And later, when Stilks met Clode, he said:

"You know, Kimval dang near fell down when I told him Jingle was after him?"

"Pedro Lodane turned green," Hawky grinned, " 'Fraid of Smidt! Funny, eh?"

They were sitting in the sheriff's office when Dan Riskey came in, his mouth open, blood pouring down from a scalp wound, his eyes bulging.

"Save me boys—" Riskey gasped. "We tortured Smidt—he'll kill me——"

"Is dat a goot vitness, you?" Smidt demanded of the two. He had followed close behind Riskey.

"Say yes—for Gawd's sake!" Riskey cried.

"Yes. All right," the officers said. "You can finish the job now."

Jingle Smidt had a short shotgun of .10 gauge. He turned, leaving Riskey with the sheriff. Five minutes later they heard the shotgun roar and on the night wind rose the unimaginable scream of a stricken human gunshot victim.

"Jack Kimval!" the two officials gasped, the sheriff adding, "What'll we do?"

"Nothing," the town marshal replied. "Smidt's doing it."

Five minutes later the gun roared twice, a gasping, yelping wail following the shots for a minute. Someone came rushing up to the officials shouting that Jingle Smidt was on the romp, killing on sight. The sheriff and marshal inquired details at length, and as they tarried, there was another shot further away down in the direction of the Ring Around a Posie. Half a minute later Pedro Lodane came running at top speed to the sheriff's for protection.

"You tried to rob Jingle, didn't you?" the sheriff asked, coldly.

"Yes—yes—but——"

"You thought it was safe. I don't know of any place where you'll be safe."

"He's killed my brother——" Lodane choked.

"He'll get you next, probably," the marshal remarked, thoughtfully.

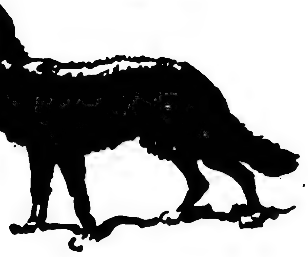
Lodane scurried on his way. They heard he paid $500 for a horse on which to leave town—not much of a horse, either. Only Riskey remained when Smidt returned.

"Vell," he said, "I can't find Pedro Lodane, who went avay. Hanax maybe vent, too. He vas pretty far to shoot, but I did, anyhow. The rest——"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I think mebby I buy de drinks, boys, if you come down, henh?" Jingle suggested, doubtfully.

"You bet!" the bystanders declared, unanimously.



The LOST LAND

Where Abide the Grim Lost Men

By WILLIAM CORCORAN

IT WAS the Lost Land. Limitless, silent, brooding, it bore on its face the beauty of death. Men had come there and found it lovely to look upon, they had come in youth and unconquerable strength, they had lived there and the land had conquered them. It had taken them to its bosom so that those who came after wondered at the signs they found, the bleached, decayed sticks that thrust from the earth to whistle in the wind, the fire-stained, rain-washed hearths, the rusted spade that still lay where a living hand had dropped it, the faded doll, the wisp of tattered curtain that hung in a gaping shack window. They wondered and knew nothing of those who had looked on the Lost Land before them.

Once Evan Cable had wondered, but the land held few secrets from him now. He knew its beauty and its breath was on his soul, but he had measured the cruelty behind its passive stillness. He knew the terrible wantonness of its moods and he had withstood the patient, unremitting conflict with which it lays siege to the youth and the strength of a man. On his face were the marks: the leanness of jaw, the thin silence of mouth, the somber fire that comes to the eyes of those who hold little speech.

He sat on the doorsill of his hewn cottonwood-log shack, and the late sun slanted past him on the hard earthen floor inside and the bare wall beyond. Lying on the ground, a shaggy dog watched him, head on paws. Between Evan's knees a worn, heavy shoe rested on an iron form while he hammered on a new half sole. It was a crude but substantial job. This was but one of many arts the land had forced upon him, another step toward a primitive self-sufficiency that removed him farther from his fellows.

He could see, and between blows of the hammer he watched, a moving figure far out on the dark sage-dotted land. It was Gid Parrish, he knew; for rarely did any-one else ever come that way. Gid Parrish was his nearest neighbor, another such as Evan, who had found himself, in response to some unnameable hunger, undertaking the dread conquest of the Lost Land. When the work permitted, when the everlasting vigilance could be relaxed, Gid rode over to visit Evan, or Evan saddled up the old roan and traveled to Gid's cabin. Whatever they had in common on which to base their friendship, neither had ever inquired, even of himself. There was sufficient in the land, its labors, in the prepossessing struggle for livelihood, to make them need each other.

When Gid rode up half an hour later, a slender, quick-nerved young man, grave beyond the wish of the generous soul that lurked in his blue eyes, their greeting was as it had been each time before, quiet, impassive.

"Howdy, Gid."

"Howdy, Evan."

The shoes, completed, were at Evan's feet. The dog panted a silent greeting. Evan moved, and Gid sat on the step beside him, taking out tobacco and papers and rolling a cigaret. Each accepted the other without speech, and for a time they sat quietly.

Gid's glance traveled over the pens beyond the house, gray with soft unprotesting life, murmuring with the sounds of the bedded flock.

"How they making out, Ev?" It was the first question, the absorbing and eternal question in the Lost Land. The welfare of the sheep, whose lives meant the life of a man.

"Good enough. One lamb went last week."

"Coyote?"

"Yeah. Same one, I expect. I got him this time."

"Did you get him? How?"

"Poison. Fooled him, this time." There was grim satisfaction in Evan's jest.

They spoke of the sheep, of their health, of the lambs which were already becoming sturdy and fat, of the state of the feed. They spoke, as men who read the government bulletins, of grasses, of shadscale and winter fat and bud sage, of the browse in the hills. They planned and calculated and allowed themselves brief visions of fine healthy flocks and heavy clips of wool and good markets to come.

"I'll make out, with a bit of luck," said Gid.

Evan looked into the distance. "You'll maybe make out. But it won't be luck. There's none of it in this country."

Gid smiled, a whimsical, youthful and half reckless smile. "Well, if you want to argue, how about bad luck?"

Evan smiled too, then, with tightened lips.

"I had visitors yesterday," said Gid. "Two of them."

This was enough to catch Evan's interest, for he turned a look of inquiry to his friend.

"Toby and Thad Meller," said Gid, and he began to grin. There was a wry look on Gid's face at the names.

Toby and Thad Meller were of the Lost Land. It had made them and they cleaved to it. Both were considered mad, Thad in a harmless, half-witted fashion and the smaller Toby in a manner at once shrewd and vindictive. How they lived no one knew. They had a few sheep, which, with their shiftless handling, never increased, and they lived in a rude shack to the north near the hills. The amiable, vacuous Thad existed as the unprotesting slave of his brother. Toby was constantly traveling about in his rickety old wagon, transacting pointless deals in feed or worthless stock, flying into raging tempers, racing off after denouncing a man as a thief and persecutor, and turning up a week later in his usual furtive manner as though nothing had ever happened. Dirty, evil of tongue and suspicious, he was a nuisance that the country simply tolerated. For the newcomers, the young men of Gid and Evan's type, he had an abiding hatred. They were interlopers in a vast empty domain he regarded in some queer fashion as his own. Only that he bore them a certain fear he might have proved dangerous.

"First Thad came along," Gid said. Humor lurked beneath his grave slow speech. "He was riding a flea-bitten old cripple of an Injun horse that must have been turned out to die. He was so tickled to be off by himself on a horse, you'd think he was a kid playing hookey. Him with his big fool grin on his face, he came along talking to that crowbait like it was a Kentucky thoroughbred with silver trimmings." He smiled. He had a story to relate, and under its spell his habitual taciturnity departed with a rush.

"How'd he get away?" Evan asked.

"Why, I suppose Toby bought the hoss somewhere and left it up at their place when he went off again. So Thad just ups and rides. He was going to town, he said.

I was busy and didn't pay any attention to him and pretty soon he went on. Then, I guess it must have been a couple of hours later, Toby himself comes along in a cloud of dust, bouncing up and down on that old wagon seat, and he pulls up sudden, demanding to know if I seen his brother Thad.

"'He stole my horse!' Toby shouted. 'Burn his hide, he stole my horse I just bought. I'll kill him.'

"Now I knew Thad hadn't been in to town in a year anyway, and he's a harmless cuss. I didn't take to the notion of spoiling his party. I gave Toby an earful that changed his tune. I described the horse, and Toby said yes, that was it. Then I said, 'Why, four fellows came by here with that horse. They were all big, bearded fellows and they wore guns on them. They were tough, tough as they come, and I didn't ask any questions.'

"'Four fellows?' Toby repeats, kind of wall-eyed.

"'Four big ones. With guns,' I repeat back.

"Then, it was funny, Ev; that mean, low-down cuss actually got scared for his brother. He scares easy himself, but he asked me did they say anything about Thad. I was kind of suspicious at first, but when he kept on asking questions I could see he really was anxious about that big loony brother and had forgotten all about the horse. It got me for a moment."

Evan, fashioning a cigaret, grunted with a certain skeptical reserve.

"He drove off toward town soon as he saw I wouldn't tell him anything," Gid continued, "and I didn't see either of them for a couple of hours. Then about sundown they came along together. Thad looked kind of cowed and scared, and Toby, the little runt, stood up in the wagon and called me every name he could think of. He waved his fist and got actually red in the face under the dirt; said I did everything from stealing the horse to kidnaping his brother. Pretty soon he went on, and his voice died out in the distance lacing it into Thad for his share in the proceedings. And I tell you, listening to him I forgot all the kind notions I had assembled regarding Toby Meller earlier that day. He's too mean and low-down to be crazy and he's too crazy to be human."

Evan nodded. "He sure ain't human." Casually he added, "I'd keep an eye on him, Gid. He might get a notion to do something."

Gid laughed shortly. "He knows better."

"Well, some day he's going to lose his head, the way everybody lets him talk as he pleases. He will try something, and while he may be sorry later he can do an average amount of damage once he starts."

Again came that odd short laugh, the faintly nervous laugh of one who fears not for himself but for the charges that are his, for the sheep, the home, the labors that these have cost. Bodily fear grows dim in the waste places but the fear of the master for his flock is an abiding fear.

That note of thin menace served to dispel the mood under which Gid had talked. Now, staring off to the lowering flush in the western sky, he grew taciturn again. It was not in the nature of Gid to be wordless, to abandon the laughter and drollery that were fundamentally his, but the still Lost Land had put its mark upon him, had claimed him for its own. It was part of the price exacted.

They talked further, briefly and with interludes of silence during which they were content to sit and smoke. The sun vanished, darkness covered the earth, and a coyote howled far off. The moon rose and the land was soft and lovely under its pale light. The dog yawned, stretched and wandered off on some errand of his own. Later Gid Parrish came to his feet reluctantly. He stood for a moment while his cigaret cast a recurrent glow upon his young, dim face.

"I'll be going," he said.

"You finished that new corral yet?" asked Evan.

"No."

"I'll ride over in a day or so and give you a hand."

"All right. Be looking for you, Ev. So long."

"So long, Gid."

Parrish went to the barn, got his horse, and departed.

MANY nights thereafter Gid Parrish came and sat on the doorsill and the two men smoked and talked and were silent for long intervals. Many days, too, Evan saddled up and rode over and helped where help was vitally needed. It was the way of the land. Longer were the days and nights when neither could leave his place, when the weariness that followed labors begun at dawn brought them sodden to the blankets at dark.

They forgot that spring night they had visited together, those two, but one other did not, one who also sat on the doorsill of his shambling shack at the edge of the foothills and stared over the waste country. He stared to where Gid and Evan dwelt and he brooded. He thought and planned and chuckled as the Lost Land lent him aid in his purpose.

The Land became a palpable force that strove with vast passive might to crush the intruders. The rains ceased and were no more. The sky was a bright blue mockery from horizon to horizon. The molten sun coursed over it day by day and with each journey grew more intense. The grasses wilted and died before their time, the creek thinned to a trickle that lost itself in gray, cracked mud. The flocks grew thin and poor; sore mouth came to plague them; and the spring lambs one by one ceased to move and lay on the earth in unprotesting death.

One morning Evan Cable loaded the camp wagon with food, hitched the horses, pulled the cabin door to, and departed for the hills. His face now was darker, harder and leaner than before. In his eyes was the blue grimness that surpasses despair. The flock moved slowly in bleating patience, the dog vigilant beside the sheep, and Evan drove them with the cruel solicitude of one in whom all purposes are bent before a single impulse of will.

Toby Meller watched him from afar, sitting on his halted wagon, an unkempt mean-mouthed little man. He watched and grinned in toothy fashion, and then whipped the horses over the flat toward home.

WHEN Evan Cable returned from the hills again there was a subtle change in him. He came down to the land with reluctant slowness. Some of the calm of the high green country was yet in his eyes, the memory of peace and solitude and a primeval harkening back to the time when man and his flock were all of human life and the hills their sole dwelling place. But now he returned. The Lost Land awaited him; the little patch of earth that was his, drab, dusty, deserted, gloated over his coming. He had not escaped; to him had been given a reprieve that would sharpen all he would yet endure.

At the door of the log shack he hesitated. The house, the sheds beyond, the hard-packed earth before it and the miserable stretch of parched, dead vegetation that had cost him so much, were even more in the grip of the dry decay of the desert than before. He spoke to the dog, in the way of men who have been long alone.

"Home again, eh, Sandy? Begin all over now. Save the sheep and let the damn place die." He laughed, the first time in days. It mocked the peace that lay in the hills. "It's dead, dead as the mud in the walls, now, Sandy. Why in God's name do I make believe it isn't? It won't be so long. . . ." He thrust in the door. The dog stood outside, wagging his tail, watching.

There was a note on the table. Evan shoved aside the sugar bowl that weighed it down, and read.

Ev—Taking a little grub with me. Been looking the place over. Dry as hell. Couldn't do anything. Come over when you get back.

Gid.

Evan wondered if there was more between the lines than the words indicated. Gid Parrish might have taken food to fend off starvation. He might be broke, sick; he might be gone from his place completely, in the mysterious manner of those solitary ones, disappearing over night, leaving another shack to wither in the winds.

"Must be hungry, Sandy. Let's see what he took."

Evan examined the rough board cupboard. Some flour was gone, a can or two of tomatoes. The coffee can was empty. That was odd, as was also the complete absence of salt. Unusual for a man to take another's full supply of any staple. Evan frowned. He would have to go to town now, and the time could not be spared. There was much to do.

"Hell of a note! What's his notion of borrowing grub anyway?" The supply in the wagon, replenished once at a bigger sheep camp, was exhausted. On the shelf was a tin of fish, a tin of meat. No coffee, no salt, no potatoes, a handful of flour. Evan slammed the cupboard door and went out of the house.

It was when he approached the barn shed and viewed the immediate space behind it that for the first time real calamity struck him. The earth was flat, dead, and a charred section of it alone remained of the precious stack of hay that had reared there when he went away. Hay that was as precious as the sheep, for without it they could not survive the winter to come. He had none to replace it; he had treasured it, grudged it like a miser, hoarding for the time when it alone could save him. Now this last barrier was down.

Evan, white of face and his lean body suddenly trembling with weakness, cursed the implacable land, cursed the bleating flock, cursed the brassy heavens above, until his voice strangled in his throat.

Two days rose and set and somehow Evan went about his unavailing tasks. Then came Toby Meller in his wagon. He found Evan seated on the doorsill, hands idle, brooding so that he did not even recognize Toby's approach.

Like a senile scarecrow, bristle-faced, drawn-mouthed, leather-skinned, Toby climbed down from the wagon seat. He cast aside a chew of scrap tobacco and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Back again, are you, Cable?" he greeted. His voice was like himself, thin and rickety. There was a faint gloating light in his queer black eyes.

Evan grunted, stared at the man.

Toby went to the water pail just inside the door. He drained the tin dipper, and after putting it down, took out a large package of tobacco and fingered the scrap. "Lambs is right nice looking," he said.

"Yes," agreed Evan. There was a thin, strained line across his forehead.

Toby mouthed a great chew of tobacco and in mumbling fashion went on. "Ain't done so well here while you was away, have you? I seen your stack was burned one morning."

Evan stared at the old man. "Yes, it was burned. How did it happen?"

"Huh!" Toby made a gesture of disdain. "Ain't none of my business. I don't know nothing about it. Just burned."

"Likely."

The old man chuckled, but without humor. "There's smarter fellows than you around here. Slick as a snake's belly. Maybe someone could have stole some of that hay. He could burn the rest. There's fellows could be right needful of hay around here."

"Who are you talking about?"

A cackling laugh rose. "I don't know nothing, young fellow. Ain't none of my business what happens to your hay."

Evan looked away and his face was bleak.

"I been in town," went on Toby. "Met your next-door neighbor today. You seen him?"

There was no answer.

Toby chuckled again, humorlessly. "That Parrish fellow has been prospering while you was away with the sheep. He sold half his flock and put in some ditches and he's got irrigation from the creek now. Got a fellow working for him too. He's a smart one."

He spat once, wiped his mouth on his sleeve a second time, and continued, undisturbed by Evan's silence. "He bought me a shot of white mule and apologized for something he did a while back. Him and me had a big talk. We was talking about you." He eyed Evan expectantly.

After a second Evan glanced at him. "Yes?"

Toby grinned. "I reckon you and him ain't as thick together as you might be. After he had a drink or two he got to saying things. He thinks you are licked. He says he will buy you out."

Evan got to his feet and faced the old man. "Get to hell out of here," he said. His face was clouded with wrath. "Get out as fast as you can go."

The scarecrow figure bristled, and the voice took on a touch of shrillness. "That's what he said, Evan Cable, and by God, he's right! You're licked. You're through and you know it."

"Get!" repeated Evan.

"I'll get when I damn well like. There ain't anybody can tell me when to come and go. Least of all a high-toned dude sheepman like you, Evan Cable."

Evan took a quick step and lifted the little man squirming off his feet. He tossed him, shrill with rage, into the wagon box. Toby picked himself up and stood on skinny legs, cursing Evan in a trembling hysteria. His quick, senile hatred possessed him completely. Evan turned his back and strode into the house, and after a moment Toby climbed in stumbling fashion onto the seat and drove away, shaking his fist at the cabin after him.

EVAN CABLE was away from the cabin much during the next few days. He sought for reasons to remove himself out of sight of it, to escape the tightening cords of defeat that encompassed him there. He browsed the sheep afar, trailing off early in the morning, returning only in time to bed down the flock securely.

He made no move to visit old Gid Parrish. Small sinuous tendrils of doubt grew and strengthened through his tormented mind. He was alone. No man stood between him and the vague end toward which he traveled. Alone, and man was allied with the Lost Land against him. There was no self-pity, no weakness; there was more the strength of dying things which no longer bend and spring to the buffets of evil, but receive them fully, rigidly, for a time before they break with sudden shattering.

Once again Evan entered his cabin and found a note on the table. It was from Gid Parrish this time also.

Here's the grub. Thought I'd see you. Pretty busy these days. Looking for you.
Gid.

On the table was a small bag of flour, one can of tomatoes and a measure of bacon. Evan stared at them. No coffee, no salt. Not half the flour that had been taken. No mention of the missing things or of others that might have gone with them.

For days Evan had waited for this. His meals had been scanty, barren preparations. He had not gone to town. This, being an essential matter, would be decisive. It was. He swept the meager pile of food from the table and cursed with livid words. There, beyond, was plenty and here was hunger, and these were the grudging payment of a just debt. Just! Evan laughed.

When he threw himself on the bed that night he lay without moving for hours. But he did not sleep.

A peculiar recompense was given him in those hours. Late, when the night was black beyond all sight and a cold wind blew out of the north, there came to his ears a commotion out at the pens. He would not have heard it, asleep. He would have heard the aftermath, which would have been too late.

He was on his feet in an instant. A leap, and he lighted the lantern. He jerked the rifle from the pegs on the wall and tore open the door. Into the darkness he raced, the swinging lantern casting shadows that danced grotesquely before him.

The flock was bleating madly and intense fear possessed it. In the night the dog barked a frantic alarm. Evan fired the rifle into the air as he ran. Coyotes again. He was at the little stockade, in the gate, among the terrified helpless animals who pressed about him. They left one space clear. In the lantern light he saw a lone still body lying in the dust, its woolly throat red with fresh blood. The killers were gone, gone far by now. They had not succeeded in their raid. Yet they had taken one precious life. Evan stared at the small dead form, then turned and left it where it lay. He went directly to the house and slammed the door with finality behind him.

Next day, too, Evan was gone from the log house. He went to town, riding in swiftly, and purchasing supplies from his slender store of cash. Standing outside the store after, when he had tied his pack behind the saddle, he felt a sudden, almost irresistible urge to remain. To remain and not go back ever. To cut in one swift moment the blind unreasoning bonds which held him captive. He had money, enough to taste for one moment again the sweetness of life. To drink, to laugh and cry out and lose himself in the heady mazes of utter abandonment. He stood trembling beside his horse.

But the iron was too deeply in him. It twisted and tortured but it held him. It drew him back. He could not quit.

He mounted and rode out of town, his eyes staring ahead over the land.

Gid Parrish chose that day to seek out Evan. There was a question in Gid's mind. Toby Meller had been around and had been talking. Smiling in hard fashion Gid had kicked him off the place, but what he said remained after the man was gone. Gid ceased to smile, and instead dropped his work and rode over to see Evan. He had a plausible errand, if need be.

Evan, on his return from town, found Gid sitting on the ground with his back to the side wall of the house, out of the sun. They stared at each other.

"Howdy, Ev."

Evan did not answer, sitting stolidly on his horse, until a moment had passed. "Well?"

Gid rose casually to his feet. Evan's manner was in keeping with what Gid had heard. "I wanted to borrow your post-hole digger," he said. "Can you spare it for a day or two?"

For a second a tiny flame was in Evan's eyes. But it vanished and his face was impassive as he untied the food pack, led the horse to the barn and unsaddled it. He returned bearing the long-handled tool. He handed it to Gid, walked past him into the cabin, and shut the door.

Gid waited for a time, but the door did not open. Gravely then he caught his horse and departed. Once he looked back as he topped a little swell. The door remained closed and the cabin gave no sign of the man within.

THE post-hole digger was but an excuse. It was to be more. Gid had no need for it, and it rested for three days beside the door of his own cabin. It was there the noontime that Toby Meller came by and saved himself from going hungry by keeping his mouth shut for once. Toby could read in a man's face a warning that needed no words.

On the fourth day the implement was returned. As before, Gid found the cabin empty and Evan nowhere in sight. Gid walked about, looked into Evan's cupboard and was troubled at what he saw. For a time he scanned the horizon, and then departed. The post-hole digger leaned against the logs beside the front door.

An hour later the creaking wagon of Toby Meller drew up before the house. Toby called, and getting no answer, climbed from his seat. He too walked about the place, peering into the barn, the cupboard and wherever his fancy led him. He cackled to himself as he went, a bird of cunning malice. Then he spied the tool beside the door.

Toby knew that tool. He had seen Evan using it. He had observed it at Gid's cabin. He could put two and two together, and find a very satisfying result. He threw the tool in his wagon and drove rapidly away toward home.

Evan knew nothing of this, nor did Gid. The one waited for the return of the implement; the other forgot it, since it was merely incidental to an unsuccessful purpose, and had been returned. Evan took to remaining close to the house so that he might watch for Gid. The sheep were restless and anxious to range further afield for better grazing, but he held them in. For once they were forgotten while he sat looking over the land for the visit he did not expect to materialize. There was a vicious delight in the occupation.

For days this went on while the madness distilled more potent in Evan's brain. The tool did not matter; another time he would not have known it was gone. It was the absence of the thing, the malicious and pointed meaning behind its absence. It was but an inconsequential incident in a train of great consequence. Other things had happened; this was the culmination.

Then Gid appeared over the land again and Evan was there to watch his approach. He came empty-handed, and there was no surprise in Evan that it should be so. There was, inevitably, a great white anger that paled his face and writhed in him so he could not speak. He strode to the house to meet Gid there.

An air of uncertainty rested on Gid Parrish, a bewilderment and a desire to fathom this strange emotion that possessed Evan. That uncertainty was on Gid's face; and Evan saw it and it confirmed what lay like a weight on his mind.

"Get going!" he ordered Gid. "Get, by God, before I forget that you were a friend of mine once!"

"Ev!" cried Gid. "For the love of God what's the matter?"

"Matter! *Matter?*" Evan stood erect on both feet as though braced to the wintry blasts of wrath that roared in his ears. He lifted a hand and pointed back whence Gid had come. "Don't you ever cross that line again while I'm on this land. If you do I'll kill you. I'll shoot you down, damn you, for a treacherous dog!"

Gid did not move, but his face grew pale as death. He spoke slowly. "I don't know what's come over you, Ev. I rode here to see if I could find out. You've taken to hating me, I know; I've heard about it. I haven't done anything, and I'll keep away if you say; but before I go let me tell you this: you do your hating on your own ground. If you don't, and keep on as you're going, I'll come here and square it if I have to crawl to your door with a dozen bullets in me."

"You will; by the living God, you will!"

Gid Parrish turned his horse and rode away without another word.

Evan carried his rifle when he went out of the house next morning. All that day it was with him, on the crook of his arm or resting close at hand. Trailing the sheep or working about the buildings he kept it by and watched over the range. Now was the time for the Lost Land to chuckle in surfeit of evil, for he was in its power. Madness was on him, and its hideous shadow was across his eyes.

Only once did a living figure cross the horizon that day. Toby Meller made one of his periodical visits. It was a strange Toby who came this time, a half frightened, half exultant little old man who was still in the grip of some powerful emotion. His shabby vest was ripped down the back and the marks of struggle were on him.

"He shook me and threw me at my wagon!" Toby explained in excited voice. Evan listened, wondering and calculating. Toby went on, "I'm an old man, but he tore into me and said he'd kill me. He's crazy. He's crazy, I tell you. He said to come and tell you he'd kill you too."

"What did you do? You been talking again?"

"No! I didn't do nothing. I just asked him was he over to see you recent. He blew up and tore into me. You better watch out, Evan Cable; he's crazy, I tell you."

Evan nodded, looking away. "He maybe acts crazy, but he's far from it. I'll be looking out, don't worry."

A look of craft was in the little black eyes. "Something may happen, young Cable. Don't forget I heard him threaten to kill you. They ain't never hanged a man yet for self-defense."

Quickly Evan's gaze shot to the old man. The two stared at each other a moment. Then Evan turned away again, and the thin, harsh laughter followed him.

Days went by, and nothing happened. The land seemed to wait, to still all life while the inevitable climax drew slowly near. The heat abated, the nights were cool and windless and the great white moon rode high in solemn grandeur. Occasionally a far coyote voiced the stealthy fear that crept abroad in the darkness.

Evan Cable, too, waited. Nothing else mattered. What he looked for he could never have told; he knew something was coming and that it would be not of his own volition. He asked only to be prepared, to greet the unknown fiercely and mightily. No longer did he question the vague destiny that drove him with such relentless purpose. Here was peace to come from conflict, and at whatever cost, it would be cheaply attained.

IT CAME in odd fashion at length, and it was Toby Meller who brought it. To Evan, who had encountered the little man up and down the land, his recurrent visits meant nothing. Now, when he came again, homeward bound as before, even more possessed of some exciting emotion, Evan gave no thought to what might lay behind that distorted, sly grin. Toby arrived at noontime, and he ate with Evan in the log house. He said little while he devoured his food, but his eyes were dilated and his hands shook as he lifted them to his mouth. After, while Evan sat smoking, he scarcely could contain himself, darting up from his chair, looking out the door, and returning to his seat again.

He began to talk, speaking of the range, of local gossip and local men. Once or twice he mentioned Gid Parrish in passing, and it seemed as though he was both eager and fearful to speak of him, as though his desire to impart information and his sense of caution struggled together. Stolidly Evan gave the little man no encouragement.

"You and Parrish ain't speaking, I guess," the little man finally said. It was a crafty statement, and he watched its effect. "You and him was good friends."

"Yes," came the curt acknowledgment.

"What happened between you?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, yes it did. I been watching you. He's done some ornery things to you, and I know it."

Evan stared. "What do you know?"

Excitement crept into the old man's voice. "Don't you think I could see? Don't you think I know about the grub he sneaked on you? And the post-hole digger he stole? I ain't saying anything about the hay——"

"What about the hay? Damn you, Toby Meller, if you got something to say, talk!"

"No, I ain't saying more than I know definite. But how about that digger? I saw it over his place day before yesterday, hid in his barn. He as good as told me he stole it, dropping hints, same as he talked about other things. Don't you think I know? I get around, Evan Cable, and I learn things you don't know."

"I know them," said Evan. He stood up from the table and walked to the door.

"He wants your land, and he wants your sheep," went on the little man. "Since he got that money he ain't been right. He hates you. You noticed how he ain't been over to see you like he used to? You figure the low-down things he done you?"

The knuckles on Evan's hand, clutching the side of the door, were white. Coherent thought was gone. In its stead was a seething turmoil of emotion into which Toby's words dropped like a catalytic acid, searing his soul and brewing a white madness.

"He's been out to get you, Evan Cable; to get you so's you'd never know it. He's sly, that Parrish is. If he can't break you he'll dry-gulch you. Oh, I been listening to him and watching him."

"You can tell him for me," said Evan in a low, harsh voice, "that I'm waiting here. You can tell him—by God in heaven, tell him I'm coming over! Tell him I'm coming at noon tomorrow." He swung about and delivered his ultimatum directly at the little man. "Tell him, by the saints and angels, if he wants a settlement he can have it!"

Toby rose, exultation in his eager black eyes. "I'll tell him, Evan Cable. I'll tell him." He scurried out the door and to his wagon before the house. He climbed upon it, and the ancient pair, feeling the reins in his hands, thrust in the traces. The wheels creaked.

Toby Meller stood aloft on spindly legs. One hand held the reins while the other lifted a rifle from the seat beside him and brandished it to Evan in the house door.

"I'll tell him!" cried Toby. "I'll tell him in hell when I meet him there! You're too late, Evan Cable." He shrieked with crazy laughter. "That's where you'll get your settlement too—in hell when you meet him there, damn your soul!"

He dropped the rifle, took up the whip, and lashed the team. The horses broke into a frightened gallop, dragging the wagon in creaking, jolting flight after them toward home.

The shock was paralyzing to Evan. He stood for a space of moments, staring over the land after the vanishing wagon. Incredible the words sounded in his ears, and incredible the meaning they bore. His entire mental processes came to a halt, switched about, and sped backward over the course they had followed. The heat of passion was gone and he stood in a dread chill.

Too late! That meant but one thing. Gid Parrish was lying dead, killed by Toby Meller. Shot to death by the rifle that foul old man had brandished aloft in fiendish joy. Shot, beyond a doubt, when the death that sped behind him was farthest from his mind.

The bleeding, white image of Gid Parrish rose in Evan's mind, and he was sick at the vision. For a flashing instant he had sought the vindictive satisfaction that image should have given him, and there was none. His own revenge, his own hatred, was unreal, and he was made to think again as though it had never existed.

There came to him irresistibly a memory of Gid as he had known him when first they had arrived in the land. The gentleness, the quiet drollery, the casual loyalty of Gid: these he saw once more. They were gone, wiped out by a single evil bullet, and he was alone in the land. Down there to the south, out of sight, another empty shack would gape to the rain and the winds and the Lost Land would recover its own. Alone! Evan uttered a wordless tragic cry and whirled about in the door.

He snatched up the rifle and darted out again. In a moment he had saddled the roan, and he leaped to his seat and sent the horse galloping madly to the north, whence Toby Meller had gone before him.

IT WAS a grim and silent procession they made, riding to the south. Before, Toby Meller drove the team, hunched in the wagon seat, wide-eyed with fear. Behind, Evan sat his saddle with bowed shoulders, and hard and fixed was the gaze he kept on the man ahead. In the crook of one arm he carried one rifle. The other, smashed, lay in the wagon box.

They came over a rise and the shack where Gid Parrish had lived and labored was in sight beyond. It was much like that which Evan called home. The gaze of the old man went in quick fascination to the open doorway. Evan stared too; about all was still and deserted, but sprawled across the doorsill, as though arrested in the act of emerging, was the immobile body of a man. A sudden stab of pain struck Evan's heart and his face was bleak. They moved along the slope.

Then, down by the little creek, where the willows and rabbit brush found precarious sustenance, there came into sight a mounted man. Toby Mellor stared at him, his weak eyes uncertain; but Evan drew his mount to an abrupt halt and cried aloud, "Oh, my God!" In the words was a compound of horror and a sense of the ultimate in incredible things. In a second he was racing down the slope, shouting.

"Gid! Gid Parrish! *Gid!*"

The oncoming rider stopped his mount and waited for Evan in suspicion and wonder. Evan flung the rifle from him high in the air as he came, sensing the vigilance that ruled Parrish, but reckless that Gid should misinterpret his headlong approach. The roan skidded to a halt beside the other horse. Evan clutched at Gid's hand and wrung it with the fervor of hysterical relief. Months of terrible repression had robbed him of all strength to resist the vast emotional upheaval that seized him.

"Gid!" he cried, and his eyes were overflowing. "He said he'd shot you, he said he'd killed you; he told me so. I thought he did. Oh, by the blessed Creator, I thought he did!"

Gid Parrish, still filled with the bitterness of their feud, and now just returned from a visit to town, did not understand what Evan was talking about. But there was that in the soul of Gid which was fine enough to rise now and drive out the bitter portion and know a friend was restored.

"What is it, Evan?" he asked. "Who said he shot me?"

"Gid! I come near to doing that myself. I been crazy, crazy."

"Tell me, Ev; what happened?"

"Toby Meller said he shot you. I been listening to him. I believed him when he said you stole my grub and my hay and that damn digger."

"I didn't, Ev."

"I know it. Lord, I know it. *He* did it, Gid; I can see he did. He hates us and jobbed us both."

"He said things to me, too, Ev. I wanted to talk to you."

"And I wouldn't let you," Evan said. He hung his head, ashamed for the tears of which he was now first aware. He still gripped Gid's hand. "God in heaven, I been a damn fool! And a lucky one."

"Say!" cried Gid abruptly. "Did he really shoot somebody. Look!"

Evan looked up, and followed the other's gaze. Gid was watching the neglected Toby, whom Evan had forgotten altogether. The little man had halted his team when Evan left him, and now he was afoot, the discarded rifle in his hands. He stood immobile. The rifle pointed in the direction of the two men, but Toby stared toward the open doorway and the body on the sill. His dark old eyes were filled with uncertainty and a growing fear.

The two men continued to watch, startled at sight of the rifle and puzzled by Toby's behavior. They saw the weapon waver, and then drop altogether as the little man broke into a run for the house. A shrill, quavering cry came from his throat.

"Good God!" cried Gid. "That's Thad in the door."

"Thad!" repeated Evan. "He killed his brother?"

"He sure enough did."

A flash of comprehension came to Evan. "Gid! He thought it was you. That poor devil was paying you a visit. He played hookey again and remembered you'd treated him white. And Toby knocked him over as he came out the door."

"Toby must have crept up along the creek far as he dared to come," Gid added. "Come on. Let's go."

They raced to the house, two men who had known love and labor and suffering and had come through the fires of hate unscathed; and in the doorway they found the little man moaning in the extreme of anguished grief, the lifeless head of his brother on his lap, the empty face peaceful in death. Only two things had Toby Meller loved, and now one was gone.

The other, the Lost Land, stretched to its far distances, bright and clear and cruel in the midday sun, and its vast silence mocked him. The Lost Land was taking its own.

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

THERE have been many foggy days recently, and this office window, high up among the buildings of lower New York, looks out upon a muffling gray expanse through which the few nearby structures loom in ghostly unreality. The Hudson River is lost somewhere beyond, its busy craft, with trailing plumes of steam, obscured from all sight. Even the sounds of the city are muffled and seem, for once, far off and robbed of their clamorous insistence.

But one sound remains; a sound not of the city, but of the harbor. This is the day of days for the harbor whistles.

How they bellow, how they moan their plaintive warnings, how they rant in hoarse protest! From the immaculate and luxurious *Ile de France,* with her cordon of tugs, to the smallest battered, frowsy lighter, they grope their precarious way up and down the lane of traffic. Fog or no fog, they must be about their business. They must be going on, whether it be a Red Hook wharf or a Singapore anchorage that lies ahead. And, under way, each last vessel rumbles and groans and tells its tale to the harbor.

There is certainly a magic in sounds, and those harbor whistles possess it aplenty. It set me to wondering about other sounds. There is the locomotive whistle, heard from afar over a prairie night; the whistle of a Mississippi sidewheeler coming around the bend; a bugle, sounding taps at moonrise on a military reservation; the howl of the coyote on the desert; the honking of the southbound wild geese; the soft lapping of the water against the ship's hull in a tropic port.

Do sounds suggest to you, also, color and scenes and people long forgotten? What sounds, I wonder, could some of you tell about; such sounds as can evoke a poignancy of memory of which no mere visual image is capable?

A PERSONAL LETTER

THE other day I received a letter from a man I have never met. We are good friends; he knows me pretty well, and I believe I know him. Our correspondence began with his first rather ironic comments on the authenticity in detail of something I once said in print. My reply in defense drew from him a milder, if no more apologetic, letter. Eventually we compromised, and have been fast friends since.

This most recent letter is of more than personal interest. It is his wish to remain anonymous, and I do not append his name. He is a forest ranger at a mountain station in a Northwestern state. He says in part:

> . . . It snowed again yesterday. The stuff is piled now in drifts that would smother a team of horses, or elephants for that matter. All the trails are closed. The only method of travel worth bothering about is on skis. That's sport at Lake Placid and up around old Chateau Frontenac, I suppose. Here it's work; and after miles of up

and down country, it becomes hard work. Not that I mind. I wouldn't be anywhere else, and the snow means so much more water for the ranchers down below next spring. The cabin is soon warm when I come in and get a few chunks of wood roaring in the stove. Then there is the radio, and the magazines . . .

That's what I've been wanting to write you about. What sort of magazine is EVERYBODY'S going to be in the future? Let's forget the past. I've said enough about that already. I read the darn thing, don't I? Sometimes, especially after I've witnessed something tragic or cruel which is typical of life out here, (or life anywhere) I get fed up on fiction. Some fiction, that is. Some that seems badly affected with dry rot. Or is it me, I wonder?

I don't know a darn thing about the South Seas. But consider the West. I like to read Western yarns, just as a crook I once knew for a brief space (a deputy was taking him in by way of the high country so as to get him into his own jurisdiction before somebody wised up brother crook that said deputy lacked authority—other than the old S. A. Colt)—well, just as I like Westerns the crook liked to read stories of crime. They annoyed him, mostly; but he read them. Often it's like that with me and the Westerns.

I'm not one of those who rant against the ridin'-shootin' school. I know folks eat them up, but I don't have to. Sometimes, in fact, I get sore at those birds who try to insist that fiction is all wrong, that the glorious West is one vast farm, and the towns too busy with Rotary meetings and Kiwanis luncheons to bother with romance. That's their trouble. The critics can't see anything between blood and gore, and pastoral calm.

Pastoral calm, me eye! They should hold down this job a while. But I won't talk of myself. I don't have to. There's material for a dozen epics within twenty miles of me in almost any direction. None of the people hereabouts are professional Westerners. They shut up like clams when the summer dudes try to start them talking of the old days. They snort at Western movies. They won't read the stories I offer them occasionally.

There's old Andy —— for instance. Rancher, well fixed. Married late; two kids just growing up. Ex-soldier; Philippine Service. Filed on a quarter in —— Valley twenty years ago. Interfered with a real hill-billy family that had squatted there a generation previous. At least the hill-billies rated anyone within fifty miles a trespasser. Had put several, it was said, in unmarked graves.

Well, Andy hung on for two years, grimly taking all they gave him. They shot his stock, burned his hay, looted his cabin—always during his absence. Would have dry-gulched him if he gave them the opportunity. He tried to call in the law. Fat chance! There wasn't any, way up there. Then they burned him out completely, and carried off all they couldn't fire. Andy caught fire, too, after that.

The rest of the story isn't pretty. In fact, it's straight out of the blood and thunder school. The law did come up when Andy got through. Tried him for murder or manslaughter or disturbing the peace or something. The trial was a farce. Full acquittal.

Andy built himself a new cabin, and it was never again molested until he tore it down himself to make room for his present ranch-house.

Try and tell me about fact and fiction! And Andy's still going strong. He last was in action as a deputy when four Oregon train robbers were reported loose in the mountains.

So go to it, and good hunting! Give us a brand of fiction in EVERYBODY'S that we can recognize when we see it—the kind we know doesn't happen every day, but which probably did happen to someone, somewhere, some day.

THE EDITOR HAS A CALLER

ONE day last fall a big, ruddy-faced, gentle-eyed man walked into the office; looked around; and quietly announced that he was RAYMOND S. SPEARS, and where was the new editor?

It must have been an hour later that he took his departure, and he left behind him a breath of the great spaces that stretch from the Mohave to the Hudson. During that time, comfortable in a big, leather-upholstered chair, he told of the seven or eight thousand miles of country he had traveled through by auto, of the people he had met and the events he had seen. I do not know of anyone who takes to the highways and byways of this land with a keener or more appreciative curiosity. He knows these United States as few of us ever can. Here's part of a letter I received from him a few weeks subsequent to his visit:

I've come a thousand miles down the Appalachians and soon start from here, where I'm with Richard K. Wood on top of a hardwood and pine-grown knob surrounded by wonderful ridges, to go westward into Memphis where I want to look up shanty-boat and other acquaintances. Thence via the Ozarks across old Indian Territory, again through Western terrain, much of it new as I've never been there, though it'll be familiar in many of its historical-eventful aspects. I've gatherd a working library about it, probably 100 pounds or so of documents, records, clippings, etc. Hope to go to the heart of it: Fort Smith, Arkansas, where the Federal Commissioner, Judge Parker, hanged eighty-eight of the miscreants in a stretch of office.

I should arrive home in California in a few weeks now, about 9000 miles to here, and 12,000 in all. 2000 more than I anticipated. And there's not a dull mile of highway in the land!

Spears.

ACROSS THE WORLD

HERE'S another letter from the far places. L. P. B. ARMIT, who wrote an excellent novelette of the Papuan pearlers for this issue, tells us something about himself. The mails take a long time to reach Port Moresby, New Guinea; but his reply to my request for information happily arrived in time to appear here with his story.

The great island of New Guinea or Papua first came into the writer's family history some fifty years ago, when an uncle, a commander in the British Navy, called at the island of Rossell, in the Louisiade Archipelago, and rescued two Chinese, the alleged sole survivors from the wrecked *St. Paul.* A little later, the same uncle published a book about the great island; and his brother, an incurable humorist, followed suit with a book on *his* "explorations" of the same big island. The latter volume was a great success; but when the scientific societies discovered the writer had written it for a wager, never having seen New Guinea at that time, they were most displeased. And then came a third member of the Armit family to write of his real explorations in the pathless jungles of New Guinea—my pater, Captain W. E. Armit, F. L. S., F. R. G. S., who led the *Argus* Expedition into the Owen Stanley Range in 1883.

My early days were spent among the Islands. Schooling was not included in the things I had to do, for the nearest school was five hundred miles away in Australia. I got my education from books, my parents teaching me the three R's—when they could keep me at home. For there was lots of fishing, boating, and similar things that small boys prefer to lessons. Somehow or other I learned enough to hold down a job, starting toil when I was within nodding distance of twelve. And then followed a glorious experience with the pearling fleet, with adventures that now provide plots for my stories. I had a great time on the luggers and learned much that was useful in later year. Incidentally I had the pleasure of donning a diving dress when I was just twelve, and I don't mind saying that I was the proudest boy in the world when I emerged from my first dip with a chunk of coral brought from the bottom ten fathoms below the rocking lugger.

Since then I've clerked, kept books, sailed boats, and done all sorts of things, from setting a broken leg to writing the life histories of beetles. And for many years now I've been a member of the local civil service, serving in many parts of the Territory of Papua as a magistrate and warden.

I've traveled the swamps and jungles, climbed mountains, canoed and rafted on fresh and salt water, lived for months in the wilderness without seeing a white face or hearing my own language spoken, sat in at tribal feasts, watched hundreds of plumed and painted natives dance in the silver moonlight, and generally learned quite a lot about this big and very fascinating island. Days of laughter, and days of tears—I've had them all, and I would go through them again.

Writing has always interested me. First I did nature articles, then came sketches of native life, and then, daring greatly, I wrote a short story. It went to Australia, and the next I knew it was published! Great excitement! Several more tales went the same way. That fixed things, for I had the bug properly after selling my first few efforts. And I'm still doing it.

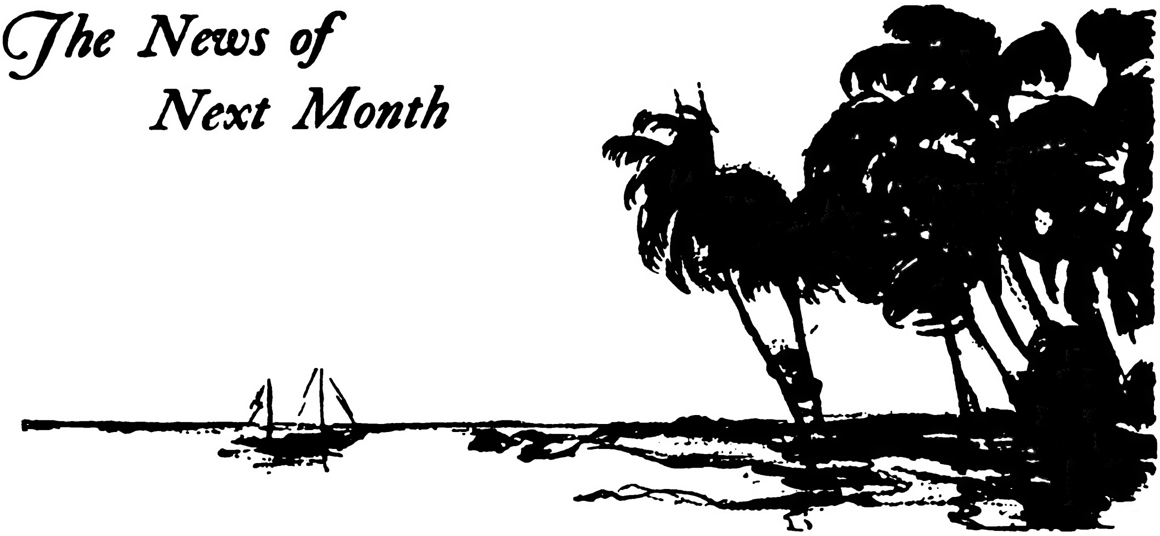
L. P. B. Armit.

OFFICE GOSSIP

THIS issue concludes one of the most popular stories the magazine has yet published. I hope you get as much kick out of the amazing solution to *The Desert Moon Mystery* as did all of us here in the office. . . . Next month starts a new serial by an author whose *Dangerous Isles* provided thrills aplenty some months back. The new one, *The Secret Lagoon*, by BASIL CAREY, is also a romance of the South Seas, and when I put it down after reading the last page there still sounded in my ears the wash and boom of the surf on the outer reefs of a tropic night. It's a yarn of gorgeous color and action. . . . J. E. GRINSTEAD's novelette in this issue is unusual for one thing. It's not a Western, yet it tells a most exciting story of a Wild corner of our old frontier. You'll enjoy it, and you'll like, too, his *Road to Palo Alto* in the next number. That also has a strange setting: the prickly pear country of Texas. . . . One hardboiled hombre who has appealed to me strongly is L. G. BLOCHMAN's General Joe Thompson of the Chinese mercenaries. He appears a second time in this magazine, and again next month. . . . There are two surprises in store for readers of the March issue. One is ARED WHITE's story. White has had about as varied a career as any man I've ever known. From the battlefields of France he has gone to the Southwest desert for this coming yarn. And it's a gripping tale. . . . The other—well, if it's not a surprise exactly, at least it's a treat. It is a short story by R. E. HAMILTON, called *The Lights of Little Grizzly.* It is a delightful and moving tale of a dying town which clung valiantly to life. Quite solemnly indeed I warn you not to miss it. . . . For that matter, the warning includes the whole next issue. I enjoyed making it up, for I know it will give you many hours of honest enjoyment. . . . And so, to press!

WILLIAM CORCORAN.

The News of Next Month



Beginning

A New South Seas Romance

The Secret Lagoon

By BASIL CAREY

A TALE that is told of the Southern Islands, where the last of the freebooters rove and the white man is a law unto himself—a tale of glamour and enchantment and the peril of mighty feud, by the author of "The Dangerous Isles"

Also

TWO EXCELLENT NOVELETTES

THE ROAD TO PALO ALTO

A Tale of Old Texas

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

JUNGLE SECRET

A Yarn of the Malay Jungle

By T. T. FLYNN

and

SEVEN short stories which make this one of the finest issues yet—including ARED WHITE's "Buzzards", a story of the American desert; R. E. HAMILTON's poignant tale of a ghost town, "The Lights of Little Grizzly"; HENRY LACOSSITT's story of the Mediterranean; L. G. BLOCHMAN's new yarn of the Chinese mercenaries; and three others